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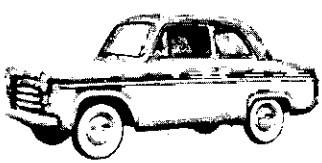

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## THE LITTLE "GRAY CELLS" OF HERCULE POIROT

# BEWARE THE KING OF CLUBS

*by AGATHA CHRISTIE*

"TRUTH," I OBSERVED, LAYING ASIDE the daily newsmonger, "is stranger than fiction!"

The remark was not, perhaps, an original one. It appeared to incense my friend. Tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, the little man carefully flicked an imaginary fleck of dust from his carefully creased trousers, and observed:

"How profound! What a thinker is my friend Hastings!"

Without displaying any annoyance at this quite uncalled-for gibe, I tapped the sheet I had laid aside.

"You've read this morning's paper?"

"I have. And after reading it, I folded it anew symmetrically. I did not cast it on the floor as you have done, with your so lamentable absence of order and method."

That is the worst of Poirot. Order and Method are his gods. He goes so far as to attribute all his success to them.

"Then you saw the account of the murder of Henry Reedburn the impresario? It was that which prompted my remark. Not only is truth stranger than fiction — it is more dramatic. Think of that solid middle-class English family, the Oglanders. Father and mother, son and daughter, typical of thousands of families all over this country. The men of the family go to the city every day; the women look after the house. Their lives are perfectly peaceful, and utterly monotonous. Last night they were sitting in their neat suburban drawing-room at Daisymead, Streatham, playing bridge. Suddenly, without any warning, the French window bursts open, and a woman staggers into the room. Her gray satin frock is marked with a crimson stain. She utters one word, "Murder!" before she sinks to the ground insensible. It is possible that they recognize her from her pictures as Valerie Saintclair, the famous dancer who has lately taken London by storm."

"Is this your eloquence, or that of the Daily *Newsmonger*?" inquired Poirot.

"The Daily *Newsmonger* was in a hurry to go to press, and contented itself with bare facts. But the dramatic possibilities of the story struck me at once."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "Wherever there is human nature, there is

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drama. *But* — it is not always just where you think it is. Remember that. Still, I too am interested in the case, since it is likely that I shall be connected with it."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. A gentleman rang me up this morning, and made an appointment with me on behalf of Prince Paul of Maurania."

"But what has that to do with it?"

"You do not read your pretty little English scandal-papers. The ones with the funny stories, and 'a little mouse has heard —' or 'a little bird would like to know —' See here."

I followed his short stubby finger along the paragraph:

"— whether the foreign Prince and the famous dancer are *really* affinities! And if the lady likes her new diamond ring!"

"And now to resume your so dramatic narrative," said Poirot. "Mademoiselle Saintclair had just fainted on the drawing-room carpet at Daisymead, you remember."

I shrugged. "As a result of Mademoiselle's first murmured words when she came round, the two male Oglanders stepped out, one to fetch a doctor to attend to the lady, who was evidently suffering terribly from shock, and the other to go to the police station — whence after telling his story, he accompanied the police to Mon Désir, Mr. Reedburn's magnificent villa, which is situated at no great distance from Daisymead. There they found the great man, who by the way suffers from a somewhat unsavory reputation, lying in the library with the back of his head cracked open like an eggshell."

"I have cramped your style," said Poirot kindly. "Forgive me, I pray. . . . Ah, here is M. le Prince!"

Our distinguished visitor was announced under the title of Count Feodor. He was a strange-looking youth, tall, eager, with a weak chin, the famous Mauranberg mouth, and the dark fiery eyes of a fanatic.

"M. Poirot?"

My friend bowed.

"Monsieur, I am in terrible trouble, greater than I can well express —"

Poirot waved his hand. "I comprehend your anxiety. Mademoiselle Saintclair is a very dear friend, is it not so?"

The Prince replied simply: "I hope to make her my wife."

Poirot sat up in his chair, and his eyes opened.

The Prince continued: "I should not be the first of my family to make a morganatic marriage. My brother Alexander has also defied the Emperor. We are living now in more enlightened days, free from the old caste-prejudice. Besides, Mademoiselle Saintclair, in actual fact, is quite my equal in rank. You have heard hints as to her history?"

"There are many romantic stories of her origin — not an uncommon thing with famous dancers. I have heard that she is the daughter of an Irish charwoman, also the story which makes her mother a Russian grand duchess."

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"The first story is, of course, nonsense," said the young man. "But the second is true. Valerie, though bound to secrecy, has let me guess as much. Besides, she proves it unconsciously in a thousand ways. I believe in heredity, M. Poirot."

"I too believe in heredity," said Poirot thoughtfully. "I have seen some strange things in connection with it — *moi qui vous parle*. . . . But to business, M. le Prince. What do you want of me? What do you fear? I may speak freely, may I not? Is there anything to connect Mademoiselle Saintclair with the crime? She knew Reedburn of course?"

"Yes. He professed to be in love with her."

"And she?"

"She would have nothing to say to him."

Poirot looked at him keenly. "Had she any reason to fear him?"

The young man hesitated. "There was an incident. You know Zara, the clairvoyant?"

"No."

"She is wonderful. You should consult her sometime. Valerie and I went to see her last week. She read the cards for us. She spoke to Valerie of trouble, of gathering clouds; then she turned up the last card — the covering card, they call it. It was the king of clubs. She said to Valerie: 'Beware. There is a man who holds you in his power. You fear him — you are in great danger through him. You know whom I mean?' Valerie went white to the lips. She nodded and said: 'Yes, yes, I know.' Shortly afterward we left. Zara's last words to Valerie were: 'Beware of the king of clubs. Danger threatens you!' I questioned Valerie. She would tell me nothing — assured me that all was well. But now, after last night, I am more sure than ever that in the king of clubs Valerie saw Reedburn, that he was the man she feared."

The Prince paused abruptly. "Now you understand my agitation when I opened the paper this morning. Supposing Valerie, in a fit of madness — oh, it is impossible!"

Poirot rose from his seat, and patted the young man kindly on the shoulder. "Do not distress yourself, I beg of you. Leave it in my hands."

"You will go to Streatham? I gather she is still there, at Daisymead — prostrated by the shock."

"I will go at once."

"I have arranged matters — through the embassy. You will be allowed access everywhere."

"Then we will depart — Hastings, you will accompany me? *Au revoir*, M. le Prince."

Mon Désir was an exceptionally fine villa, thoroughly modern and comfortable. A short carriage-drive led up to it from the road, and beautiful gardens extended behind the house for some acres.

On mentioning Prince Paul's name, the butler who answered the door took us at once to the scene of the tragedy. The library was a magnificent room, running from back to front of

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the whole building, with a window at either end, one giving on the front carriage-drive, the other on the garden. It was in the recess of the latter window that the body had lain. It had been removed not long before, the police having concluded their examination.

"That is annoying," I murmured to Poirot. "Who knows what clues they may have destroyed?"

My little friend smiled. "Eh — eh! How often must I tell you that clues come from *within*? In the little gray cells of the brain lies the solution of every mystery."

He turned to the butler. "I suppose, except for the removal of the body, the room has not been touched?"

"No, sir. It's just as it was when the police came up last night."

"These curtains, now. I see they pull right across the window-recess. They are the same in the other window. Were they drawn last night?"

"Yes, sir. I draw them every night."

"Then Reedburn must have drawn them back himself?"

"I suppose so, sir."

"Did you know your master expected a visitor last night?"

"He did not say so, sir. But he gave orders he was not to be disturbed after dinner. You see, sir, there is a door leading out of the library onto the terrace at the side of the house. He could have admitted anyone that way."

"Was he in the habit of doing that?"

The butler coughed discreetly. "I believe so, sir."

Poirot strode to the door in question. It was unlocked. He stepped through it onto the terrace which joined the drive on the right; on the left it led up to a red brick wall.

"The fruit garden, sir. There is a door leading into it farther along, but it was always locked at 6 o'clock."

Poirot nodded, and re-entered the library, the butler following.

"Did you hear nothing of last night's events?"

"Well, sir, we heard voices in the library, a little before 9. But that wasn't unusual, especially being a lady's voice. But of course, once we were all in the servants' hall, right the other side, we didn't hear anything at all. And then, about 11 o'clock, the police came."

"How many voices did you hear?"

"I couldn't say, sir. I only noticed the lady's.

"Ah!"

"I beg pardon, sir, but Dr. Ryan is still in the house, if you would care to see him."

We jumped at the suggestion, and in a few minutes the doctor, a cheery, middle-aged man, joined us, and gave Poirot all the information he required. Reedburn had been lying near the window, his head by the marble window-seat. There were two wounds, one between the eyes, and the other, the fatal one, on the back of the head.

"He was lying on his back?"

"Yes. There is the mark." He pointed to a small dark stain on the floor.

"Could not the blow on the back

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of the head have been caused by his striking the floor?"

"Impossible. Whatever the weapon was, it penetrated some distance into the skull."

Poirot looked thoughtfully in front of him. In the embrasure of each window was a carved marble seat, the arms being fashioned in the form of a lion's head. A light came into Poirot's eyes. "Supposing he had fallen backward on this projecting lion's head, and slipped from there to the ground. Would not that cause a wound such as you describe?"

"Yes, it would. But the angle at which he was lying makes that theory impossible. And besides, there could not fail to be traces of blood on the marble of the seat."

"Unless they were washed away?"

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders. "That is hardly likely. It would be to no one's advantage to give an accident the appearance of murder."

"Quite so," acquiesced Poirot. "Could either of the blows have been struck by a woman, do you think?"

"Oh, quite out of the question, I should say. You are thinking of Mademoiselle Saintclair, I suppose?"

"I think of no one in particular until I am sure," said Poirot, gently.

He turned his attention to the open French window, and the Doctor continued:

"It is through here that Mademoiselle Saintclair fled. You can just catch a glimpse of Daisymead between the trees. Of course, there are many houses nearer to the front of the house on the road, but as it happens, Daisymead, though some distance away, is the only house visible this side."

"Thank you for your amiability, Doctor," said Poirot. "Come, Hastings, we will follow the footsteps of Mademoiselle."

Poirot led the way down through the garden, out through an iron gate, across a short stretch of green and in through the garden gate of Daisymead, which was an unpretentious little house on about half an acre of ground. There was a small flight of steps leading up to a French window. Poirot nodded in their direction.

"That is the way Mademoiselle Saintclair went. For us, who have not her urgency to plead, it will be better to go round to the front door."

A maid admitted us and took us into the drawing-room, then went in search of Mrs. Oglander. The room had evidently not been touched since the night before. The ashes were still in the grate, and the bridge table was still in the center of the room, with a dummy exposed, and the hands thrown down. The place was somewhat overloaded with gimcrack ornaments, and a good many family portraits of surpassing ugliness adorned the walls.

Poirot gazed at them more leniently than I did, and straightened one or two that were hanging a shade askew. "*La famille*, it is a strong tie, is it not? Sentiment, it takes the place of beauty."

I agreed, my eyes being fixed on a family group comprising a gentleman

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with whiskers, a lady with a high "front" of hair, a stolid, thick-set boy, and two little girls tied up with a good many unnecessary bows of ribbon. I took this to be the Oglander family in earlier days, and studied it with interest.

The door opened, and a young woman came in. Her dark hair was neatly arranged, and she wore a drab-colored sports coat and a tweed skirt.

She looked at us inquiringly. Poirot stepped forward. "Miss Oglander? I regret to derange you — especially after all you have been through. The whole affair must have been most disturbing."

"It has been rather upsetting," admitted the young lady cautiously. I began to think that the elements of drama were wasted on Miss Oglander, that her lack of imagination rose superior to any tragedy. I was confirmed in this belief as she continued: "I must apologize for the state this room is in. Servants get so foolishly excited."

"It was here that you were sitting last night, *n'est-ce-pas?*"

"Yes, we were playing bridge after supper, when —"

"Excuse me — how long had you been playing?"

"Well —" Miss Oglander considered. "I really can't say. I suppose it must have been about 10 o'clock. We had had several rubbers, I know."

"And you yourself were sitting — where?"

"Facing the window. I was playing with my mother and had gone three no trump. Suddenly, without any warning, the window burst open, and Miss Saintclair staggered into the room."

"You recognized her?"

"I had a vague idea her face was familiar."

"She is still here, is she not?"

"Yes, but she refuses to see anyone. She is still quite prostrated."

"I think she will see me. Will you tell her that I am here at the express request of Prince Paul of Maurania?"

I fancied that the mention of a royal prince rather shook Miss Oglander's imperturbable calm. But she left the room on her errand without any further remark, and returned almost immediately to say that Mademoiselle Saintclair would see us in her room.

We followed her upstairs, and into a fair-sized light bedroom. On a couch by the window a woman was lying who turned her head as we entered. The contrast between the two women struck me at once, the more so as in actual features and coloring they were not unalike — but oh, the difference! Not a look, not a gesture of Valerie Saintclair's but expressed drama. She seemed to exhale an atmosphere of romance. A scarlet flannel dressing-gown covered her feet — a homely garment in all conscience; but the charm of her personality invested it with an exotic flavor, and it seemed an Eastern robe of glowing color.

Her large dark eyes fastened themselves on Poirot.

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"You come from Paul?" Her voice matched her appearance — it was full and languid.

"Yes, mademoiselle. I am here to serve him — and you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything that happened last night. *But everything!*"

She smiled rather wearily.

"Do you think I should lie? I am not stupid. I see well enough that there can be no concealment. He held a secret of mine, that man who is dead. He threatened me with it. For Paul's sake, I endeavored to make terms with him. I could not risk losing Paul. . . . Now that he is dead, I am safe. But for all that, I did not kill him."

Poirot shook his head with a smile. "It is not necessary to tell me that, mademoiselle. Now recount to me what happened last night."

"I had offered him money. He appeared to be willing to deal with me. He appointed last night at 9 o'clock. I was to go to Mon Désir. I knew the place; I had been there before. I was to go round to the side door into the library, so that the servants should not see me."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but were you not afraid to trust yourself alone there at night?"

Was it my fancy, or was there a momentary pause before she answered?

"Perhaps I was. But you see, there was no one I could ask to go with me. And I was desperate. Reedburn admitted me to the library. Oh, that man! I am glad he is dead! He played with me, as a cat does with a mouse. He taunted me. I begged and implored him. I offered him every jewel I have. All in vain! Then he named his own terms. Perhaps you can guess what they were. I refused. I told him what I thought of him. I raved at him. He remained calmly smiling. And then, as I fell to silence at last, there was a sound — from behind the curtain in the window. . . . He heard it too. He strode to the curtains and flung them wide apart. There was a man there, hiding — a dreadful-looking man, a sort of tramp. He struck at Mr. Reedburn — then he struck again, and he went down. The tramp clutched at me with his blood-stained hand. I tore myself free, slipped through the window, and ran for my life. Then I perceived the lights in this house, and made for them. The blinds were up, and I saw some people playing bridge. I almost fell into the room. I just managed to gasp out 'Murder!' and then everything went black —"

"Thank you, mademoiselle. It must have been a great shock to your nervous system. As to this tramp, could you describe him? Do you remember what he was wearing?"

"No — it was all so quick. But I should know the man anywhere. His face is burned in my brain."

"Just one more question, mademoiselle. The curtains of the *other* window, the one giving on the drive, were they drawn?"

For the first time a puzzled expression crept over the dancer's face. She

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seemed to be trying to remember.

"*Eh bien, mademoiselle?*"

"I think — I am almost sure — yes, quite sure! They were *not* drawn."

"That is curious, since the other ones were. No matter. It is, I daresay, of no great importance. You are remaining here long, mademoiselle?"

"The doctor thinks I shall be fit to return to town tomorrow." She looked round the room. Miss Oglander had gone out. "These people, they are very kind — but they are not of my world. I shock them! And to me — well, I am not fond of the *bourgeoisie!*"

A faint note of bitterness underlay her words.

Poirot nodded. "I understand. I hope I have not fatigued you unduly with my questions?"

"Not at all, monsieur. I am only too anxious Paul should know all as soon as possible."

"Then I will wish you good day, mademoiselle."

As Poirot was leaving the room, he paused, and pounced on a pair of patent-leather slippers. "Yours, mademoiselle?"

"Yes, monsieur. They have just been cleaned and brought up."

"Ah!" said Poirot, as we descended the stairs. "It seems that the domestics are not too excited to clean shoes, though they forget a grate. Well, *mon ami*, at first there appeared to be one or two points of interest, but I fear, I very much fear, that we must regard the case as finished. It all seems straightforward enough."

"And the murderer?"

"Hercule Poirot does not hunt down tramps," replied my friend.

Miss Oglander met us in the hall. "It you will wait in the drawing-room a minute, Mamma would like to speak to you."

The room was still untouched, and Poirot idly gathered up the cards, shuffling them with his tiny, fastidiously groomed hands.

"Do you know what I think, my friend?"

"No," I said eagerly.

"I think that Miss Oglander made a mistake in going three no trump. She should have gone four spades."

"Poirot! You are the limit."

"*Mon Dieu*, I cannot always be talking blood and thunder!"

Suddenly he stiffened: "Hastings — *Hastings*. See! The king of clubs is missing from the pack!"

"Zara!" I cried.

"Eh?" He did not seem to understand my allusion. Mechanically he stacked the cards and put them away in their cases. His face was very grave.

"Hastings," he said at last, "I, Hercule Poirot, have come near to making a big mistake — a very big mistake."

I gazed at him, impressed, but utterly uncomprehending.

"We must begin again, Hastings. Yes, we must begin again. But this time we shall not err."

He was interrupted by the entrance of a handsome middle-aged lady. She carried some household books in her hand. Poirot bowed to her.

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"Do I understand, sir, that you are a friend of — er — Miss Saintclair's?"

"I come from a friend of hers, madame."

"Oh, I see. I thought perhaps —"

Poirot suddenly waved brusquely at the window.

"Your blinds were not pulled down last night?"

"No — I suppose that is why Miss Saintclair saw the light so plainly."

"There was moonlight last night. I wonder that you did not see Mademoiselle Saintclair from your seat here facing the windows?"

"I suppose we were engrossed with our game. Nothing like this has ever happened to us before."

"I can quite believe that, madame. And I will put your mind at rest. Mademoiselle Saintclair is leaving tomorrow."

"Oh!" The good lady's face cleared.

"And I will wish you good morning, madame."

A servant was cleaning the steps as we went out of the front door. Poirot addressed her.

"Was it you who cleaned the shoes of the young lady upstairs?"

The maid shook her head. "No, sir. I don't think they've been cleaned."

"Who cleaned them, then?" I inquired of Poirot, as we walked down the road.

"Nobody. They did not need cleaning."

"I grant that walking on the road or path on a fine night would not soil them. But surely after going through the long grass of the garden, they would have been soiled and stained."

"Yes," said Poirot with a curious smile. "In that case, I agree, they would have been stained."

"But —"

"Have patience a little half hour, my friend. We are going back to Mon Désir."

The butler looked surprised at our reappearance, but offered no objection to our returning to the library.

"Hi, that's the wrong window, Poirot," I cried as he made for the one overlooking the carriage-drive.

"I think not, my friend. See here." He pointed to the marble lion's head. On it was a faint discolored smear. He shifted his finger and pointed to a similar stain on the polished floor.

"Someone struck Reedburn a blow with his clenched fist between the eyes. He fell backward on this projecting bit of marble, then slipped to the floor. Afterward, he was dragged across the floor to the other window, and laid there instead, but not quite at the same angle, as the Doctor's evidence told us."

"But why? It seems utterly unnecessary."

"On the contary, it was essential. Also, it is the key to the murderer's identity — though, by the way, he had no intention of killing Reedburn. He must be a very strong man!"

"Because of having dragged the body across the floor?"

"Not altogether. It has been an

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interesting case. I nearly made an imbecile of myself, though."

"Do you mean to say it is over, that you know everything?"

"Yes."

A remembrance smote me. "No," I cried. "There is one thing you do *not* know!"

"And that?"

"You do not know where the missing king of clubs is!"

"Eh? Oh, that is droll! That is very droll, my friend."

"Why?"

"*Because it is in my pocket!*" He drew it forth with a flourish.

"Oh!" I said, rather crestfallen. "Where did you find it? Here?"

"There was nothing sensational about it. It had simply not been taken out with the other cards. It was in the box."

"H'm! All the same, it gave you an idea, didn't it?"

"Yes, my friend. I present my respects to His Majesty."

"And to Madame Zara!"

"Ah, yes — to the lady also."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

"We are going to return to town. But I must have a few words with a certain lady at Daisymead first."

The same little maid opened the door to us.

"They're all at lunch now, sir — unless it's Miss Saintclair you want to see, and she's resting."

"It will do if I can see Mrs. Oglander for a few minutes. Will you tell her?"

We were led into the drawing-room to wait.

In a few minutes Mrs. Oglander came into the room. Poirot bowed.

"Madame, we, in our country, have a great tenderness, a great respect for the mother. The *mère de famille*, she is everything!

"It is for that reason that I have come — to allay a mother's anxiety. The murderer of Mr. Reedburn will not be discovered. Have no fear. I, Hercule Poirot, tell you so. I am right, am I not? Or is it a wife that I must reassure?"

There was a moment's pause. Mrs. Oglander seemed to search Poirot with her eyes. At last she said quietly: "I don't know how you know — but yes, you are right."

Poirot nodded gravely. "That is all, madame. But do not be uneasy. Your English policemen have not the eyes of Hercule Poirot." He tapped the family portrait on the wall.

"You had another daughter once. She is dead, madame?"

"Yes, she is dead."

"Ah!" said Poirot briskly. "Well, we must return to town. You permit that I return the king of clubs to the pack? It was your only slip. You understand, to have played bridge for an hour or so, with only fifty-one cards — well, no one who knows anything of the game would credit it for a minute! *Bonjour!*"

"And now, my friend," said Poirot as we stepped toward the station, "you see it all!"

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"I see nothing! Who killed Reedburn?"

"John Oglander, Junior. I was not quite sure if it was the father or the son, but I fixed on the son as being the stronger and younger of the two. It had to be one of them, because of the window."

"Why?"

"There were four exits from the library — two doors, two windows; but evidently only one would do. Three exits gave on the front, directly or indirectly. The tragedy had to occur in the back window in order to make it appear that Valerie Saintclair came to Daisymead by chance. Really, of course, she fainted, and John Oglander carried her across over his shoulders. That is why I said he must be a strong man."

"Did they go there together, then?"

"Yes. You remember Valerie's hesitation when I asked her if she was not afraid to go alone? John Oglander went with her — which didn't improve Reedburn's temper, I fancy. They quarreled, and it was probably some insult leveled at Valerie that made Oglander hit him."

"But why the bridge?"

"Bridge presupposes *four* players. A simple thing like that carries a lot of conviction. Who would have supposed that there had been only three people in that room all the evening?"

"There's one thing I don't understand. What have the Oglanders to do with the dancer Valerie Saintclair?"

"Ah, that I wonder you did not see. And yet you looked long enough at that picture. Mrs. Oglander's other daughter may be dead to her family, but the world knows her as Valerie Saintclair!"

"What?"

"Did you not see the resemblance the moment you saw the two sisters together?"

"No," I confessed. "I only thought how extraordinarily dissimilar they were."

"That is because your mind is so open to external romantic impressions, my dear Hastings. The features are almost identical. So is the coloring. The interesting thing is that Valerie is ashamed of her family, and her family is ashamed of her. Nevertheless, in a moment of peril, she turned to her brother for help, and when things went wrong, they all hung together in a remarkable way. They can all act, that family. That is where Valerie gets her histrionic talent from. I, like Prince Paul, believe in heredity! They deceived *me!* But for a lucky accident, and a test question to Mrs. Oglander by which I got her to contradict her daughter's account of how they were sitting, the Oglander family would have put a defeat on Hercule Poirot."

"What shall you tell the Prince?"

"That Valerie could not possibly have committed the crime, and that I doubt if that tramp will ever be found. Also, to convey my compliments to Zara. A curious coincidence, that! I think I shall call this case 'Beware the King of Clubs.' What do you think, my friend?"

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*Arthur Gordon was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1913. He had, in his own words, "a rather overpowering education" — St. Paul's School in New Hampshire, four years at Yale, then two at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. It is significant that he did not spend too much time studying; he preferred "playing a lot of games violently," including two years of stroking the Balliol crew at Oxford. But one thing has emerged after the years: because of — or in spite of — a full academic and athletic career, Arthur Gordon is that rare human mechanism called a "born writer"; and one small proof is the fact that he sold the very first short story he ever wrote. That, as we say, is only a small proof — the larger proofs are revealed in his post-collegiate career.*

*Back from Oxford, Mr. Gordon aimed his spear at the windmill of the publishing business. He did various and sundry labors, including, as a "reader" for "Good Housekeeping," passing editorial judgment on unsolicited poems at the rate of 100,000 a year. When the war came, he joined the Air Corps, served temporarily with the RAF, remained overseas for three years, and came back in 1945 a major.*

*Shortly after his second return to the United States, he became the editor of "Cosmopolitan," where he stayed three years only to discover that what he really wanted to do is write — remember, we told you that Mr. Gordon is a "born writer." And that he is. His very first novel,* REPRISAL, *was a Literary Guild selection in 1950, and since then his short stories have appeared in most of the national magazines.*

*Here is one of Mr. Gordon's lollapaloosas — and as is usually the case in Arthur Gordon's stories, it deals with an important theme out of modern life. What are your views on the subject of — but perhaps we had better let Mr. Gordon himself prepare you for the problem.*

# DEAD DUCK

*by ARTHUR GORDON*

ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE BLEAK, wind-chopped bay, Conroy had seemed in high spirits. He stood silhouetted against the sunset, a bulky figure in hunting clothes, braced against the frenzied bucking of the powerboat. Bannister sat hunched amidships, trying not to be fright-

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ened. Only a moderate sea was running, but to a man unfamiliar with salt water, a man who could barely swim, the steel-gray waves looked enormous, menacing.

Bannister hung on grimly and wondered for the fiftieth time why Mike Conroy had asked him on a duck-shooting trip. They were good friends, but Bannister was no outdoor man. He had never shot a duck in his life. Still, Conroy had talked him into it, and here they were in the middle of Barnegat Bay in the late afternoon of a freezing day with night coming down over a gray wilderness of marsh and water.

A wave slapped them and the air was full of tiny liquid pellets so cold they seemed to burn the skin. Bannister winced, but Conroy whipped off his shooting cap and shook his grizzled, leonine head as if he loved it. He said something to Bill Keller, the leathery-faced bayman at the wheel. Keller pointed, and Conroy turned his head. "You can see it now, Charlie. Your hotel for the night."

The boat came into the lee of the far shore and at once grew steadier. Bannister moved forward cautiously. Half a mile away a crazy silhouette was etched dimly against the western sky. It was a shack built on stilts rising eight or ten feet above the marsh. A skeleton dock led down to the water.

Bannister said, "We sleep in that?"

Conroy clapped him on the shoulder. "It's more comfortable than it looks. You'll see."

Ten minutes later the powerboat nosed up to the dock. The bluster of the engine died. The sudden silence was like a blow.

"Come on, Charlie," Conroy said. "We'll get a fire going while Bill unloads the gear." He strode confidently along the narrow catwalk. "Mind you don't slip; there's ice on these planks."

Bannister followed slowly, trying to shake off the depression that was settling over him. He had never been particularly moody, or sensitive to environments. But this lonely place . . .

Inside the shack, Conroy was lighting an oil lamp. "Come in, come in!" he said.

The shack was twelve feet square. Double-decker bunks with red blankets occupied two corners. A table and chairs stood in the middle of the floor. There was a kerosene burner for cooking, a sink with a drain but no running water, and a large Franklin stove. There were shelves of tinned goods, a few old magazines, and some well-thumbed playing cards. It was bitterly cold.

Conroy touched a match to the fire already laid in the big stove. "It'll warm up in no time." He looked up as Keller came in with the guns and rucksacks. "That's fine, Bill. Thanks."

"How about tomorrow, Mr. Conroy?" the bayman asked.

The big man hesitated, frowning. "You'd better come over about 10 in the morning. If we have no luck, we won't want to sit here all day."

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Keller nodded. "Good luck to you."

He backed out and closed the door. A moment later they heard the whine of the engine and then silence settled down. "My God," Bannister said, "it's really the middle of nowhere, isn't it?"

Conroy was unpacking the rucksacks. "It's isolated, all right. But that's what I like about it. No problems out here. Except the ones you bring with you."

Something in his voice made Bannister wheel around. "What made you invite me, Mike? I know at least six of our friends who'd give their eyeteeth to be out here on the marshes with you. I don't know a mallard from a teal, and couldn't care less. But you practically shanghaied me! Why?"

"I like you, for one thing, Charlie. And I think you like me."

"Of course I like you! We've been friends for years. But I'm puzzled by all this. There's something behind it, isn't there?"

"Maybe," said Conroy. "Maybe. But let me get to it in my own time, will you? Meanwhile, how about some supper?"

They had supper. They washed the dishes. At Conroy's suggestion they played gin rummy. Outside, night gripped the cabin in an icy fist. The wind moaned eerily across the frozen marsh.

Bannister found it difficult to concentrate on his cards. Try as he would, he could not banish the conviction that something unpleasant lay ahead. And yet, he told himself repeatedly, such thoughts were ridiculous. He had known Conroy for twenty years — the man was as sound as the bank of which he was vice-president. Everyone admired him; a fine sportsman, a solid citizen, an excellent host. A widower with two grown children, both married. A loyal friend, sympathetic and generous. Why, a year ago when Bannister had applied for a loan and the bank turned him down for lack of collateral, Conroy had let him have five thousand on a promissory note — no security at all.

The wind pounced down again with a howl like a banshee; the shack seemed to shrink; the windows rattled. Bannister thought of the ducks huddled in the freezing marshes waiting for the dawn, and involuntarily he shivered.

"What's the matter?" Conroy asked him. "Cold?"

"No. Somebody walked over my grave, I guess."

"Not superstitious, are you?"

"No. It's just an old saying."

"I'm glad you're not superstitious," Conroy said grimly. "That *would* have been a bore!"

"What do you mean?"

Conroy ignored the question. He said, after a pause, "Remember that dinner party at the Emmetts, Charlie? Four, five months ago?"

"Sure," Bannister said. "It was a good evening."

"Recall that discussion we had?"

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"No. Not particularly."

Conroy drew a card and discarded it. "It was about mercy killing. Euthanasia."

"Oh, yes." Bannister drew and played another card. "We did talk about that, didn't we?"

"Several points of view were expressed," Conroy said slowly. "I particularly remember yours. You said you thought that no doctor had the right to take a human life without the consent of the patient. But if the patient were fully aware of the situation, and requested the needle, then he was entitled to have it. Isn't that what you said?"

"I don't remember exactly," Bannister said. He indicated the deck of cards. "Your turn, Mike."

Conroy's big hand came out and took a card. He said, without changing his inflection, "I have cancer, Charlie. The doctors say I won't last more than six months."

Bannister sat quite still; his face was suddenly pinched and drawn.

"Six months," Conroy repeated. "Not a very pleasant six months, either. About two more months of relative normalcy. Then two more on opiates. Then two more when opiates won't help — much." He laid down his cards, face up, and stared at Bannister. "Gin!"

Bannister swallowed hard. "My God, Mike, I don't know what to say! Are you absolutely sure . . ."

Conroy made an impatient gesture. "I had the diagnosis checked. And rechecked. There's no doubt."

"But can't they do something? Can't they operate — try X-ray?"

"Could have," Conroy said coolly, "a year ago. I waited too long, Charlie. Like a damn fool. But I never thought the symptoms I had were important . . ."

"Look, Mike," Bannister said earnestly. "I know a doctor who's a specialist. One of the best. When we go back tomorrow, I'll phone him first thing. He . . ."

"Thanks, Charlie," Conroy said. "But I'm not going back."

Bannister gripped the edge of the table. "What do you mean?"

Conroy looked straight into his eyes. "You know exactly what I mean." He got up and began to pace the room. "I've thought about it very carefully, Charlie — ever since I knew. It's the only thing that makes sense. I've had a good life, a full life. Why let it end in misery and agony? Why?

"It's not as if I were needed. Both the kids are married — they have their own lives. The bank will survive. My friends may miss me briefly, but no more than they would if I waited six months."

Bannister wet his lips. "You never know . . ."

"Some miraculous cure, you mean? Don't be silly, Charlie! They won't find one in the next six months, and even if they did it would be too late to do me any good." He wheeled back to the table and put his hands flat on it. "You said it yourself, Charlie, that night at the Emmetts. You said

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that while a man can't do anything about his arrival in this world, he does control his exit from it. You said that if an incurable patient, facing great pain, asked his doctor for a lethal needle, he was entitled to it. Well . . ." he straightened up slowly, "I'm the patient, Charlie. And you're the doctor. And this —" he picked up the shotgun — "this is the needle."

"No! That would be murder!"

"Not at all," said Conroy calmly. "It will be an accident. You asked me why I chose you for this expedition. Two reasons, Charlie. First: the things you said that night at the Emmetts. Second: the fact that you'd never been duck-shooting. Anybody knows that an inexperienced man is dangerous in a duck blind. It's easy to get excited, rattled. You start swinging on a bird and you forget to stop. Happens every year. No, don't interrupt for a minute.

"It will be an accident. No one will question it. Oh, there'll be an inquest and all that, but you'll be cleared automatically. People will feel sorry for you, but they'll soon forget it. And you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you've rendered a very great service to a friend."

"No!" said Bannister again. He looked wildly around the cabin as if searching for someone to appeal to. "You're crazy, Mike! I couldn't do a thing like that!"

"I thought you'd say that at first. It's the normal reaction, the conventional one. But before we're through I think I can make you see it differently." He actually laughed. "You've got to listen. You can't run away; unless you want to row over to the mainland."

Bannister calmed himself with an effort. "Listen, Mike, why don't you . . ."

"Why don't I just eat some sleeping pills and get it over with? Well, I'll tell you, Charlie, I did think of that. But, rightly or wrongly, there's a certain stigma attached to suicide. I didn't want kids pointing at my grandchildren and whispering. No. I said to myself, *Look, Conroy, if you could arrange things so that the exact moment of your death coincided with a moment of great happiness, what would that moment be?* And then, of course, I knew it would be the moment when I'd just nailed a pair of incoming ducks, right and left, a good clean double. My mind would be so full of excitement and satisfaction there'd be no room for anything else. If oblivion came then, I told myself, that would be fine, that would be perfect." He leaned back in his chair. "So here we are, Charlie."

There was a silence in which Bannister could hear the ticking of the rusty alarm clock. Finally he said, "And if I refuse?"

Conroy shrugged. "I can't force you, of course. I'll have to arrange it myself, somehow. A clumsy business, which will fool nobody. And I must say, I don't relish the thought of it. But I'm not going back tomorrow, Charlie. This thing is going to be done by the time Bill Keller gets here."

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He stood up again and moved over to the window. "Wind's hauling around to the northeast. They should be flying tomorrow, all right." He turned slowly. "I've left all my affairs in pretty good shape, Charlie. Not too perfect — I didn't want it to look as if I'd planned on stepping out of the picture. And while I was at it, I dug this out of the safe." He tossed a folded paper on the table. "That's your note, Charlie. I've marked it 'Paid in Full.' "

Bannister looked down at the paper. He did not touch it.

"I hope you won't consider it a bribe," Conroy said. "It's just that — well, I know you need the money, and I don't. So tear it up, if you like. Or keep it for the record, whichever you prefer." He stretched his hands above his head and yawned. "What say we hit the sack? Five o'clock'll be on us before we know it."

He sat down on the edge of one of the bunks, pulled off his boots, peeled his clothes down to his heavy underwear. "Don't bother to set the alarm clock," he said. "I always wake up. Haven't missed in thirty years."

He rolled over and pulled the blankets around him. Bannister sat very still. Outside, the wind seemed to have dropped a bit, but the cabin creaked with cold. Suddenly Bannister noticed another sound, gentle, rhythmical.

It was Conroy, snoring.

The blind was on a small island in the bay, perhaps a third of a mile from the cabin. It faced west, an almost invisible slit in the frozen marsh. Near it was a tiny cove, and into this Conroy steered the rowboat. "Here we are," he said. "Just about right. It'll be light enough to shoot in ten minutes."

He steadied the rowboat while Bannister stepped out, then dragged it into the stiff, brittle grass. A skiff was lying there, decoys stacked neatly in the stern. Conroy shoved it into the water. "I'll rig out. You can get set in the blind, if you want to."

Bannister picked up the guns and rucksacks and carried them to the blind. As he did so, two shadowy projectiles flashed over his head. "Pintail," said Conroy, balancing in the skiff. "Look at 'em go!"

Bannister watched him toss the decoys, saw them hit with a subdued splash, bob a bit, then come to rest. Light was filtering rapidly into the sky now. There was just enough wind to riffle the steely water. It was piercingly cold.

Conroy poled the skiff to shore, dragged it up, covered it with marsh grass. He jumped down into the blind and looked at Bannister. "We've got plenty of time," he said. "Let's see how it goes for a while, eh?"

"Look, Mike," Bannister began.

He felt the other's hand pressing him down. "Here comes a single now! Gun loaded? No? Well, maybe I can nail him." There was a metallic snick as Conroy broke his gun and jammed in two shells. The duck, a big Canadian redleg, drove straight for the

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decoys, set his wings, then flared as Conroy stood up. The twelve-gauge roared once; the bird fell. "Splashed that one," said Conroy happily.

He stood erect, tense and eager. Bannister thought he had never seen a man more alive. "Might as well get him before he drifts away," Conroy said. He climbed out of the blind, dragged the skiff into the water, poled out, and retrieved the bird. "Load up, load up," he said when he got back. "You'll get a shot in a minute."

"Mike," said Bannister imploringly. "Mike, I've got to talk to you. I . . ."

"No!" Conroy whirled on him; for the first time his face looked angry. "No more talking! Sometime this morning I'm going to turn my back on you and try to kill a pair of ducks. Then it's up to you. If you fail me, I'll do it myself, understand? But I don't want to talk about it. This is my last hunt; I'm not going to have it spoiled by a lot of morbid chatter. Look there!" He pointed. "Here comes a flight of butterballs. They won't decoy; they'll go right over us." He picked up Bannister's gun, loaded it, thrust it into his hands. "Let's see you tag one!"

Bannister hesitated, then fired both barrels almost simultaneously into what seemed a solid mass of feathers. The recoil staggered him; he had forgotten how a twelve-gauge could kick. But no bird fell.

"Shot at the whole flock, didn't you?" Conroy said. He laughed. "Almost never hit anything when you do that. Pick one bird, even if you can see twenty. You'll get another chance in a minute."

But the minutes passed and nothing happened. Behind them the sky turned crimson; the sun rose. The wind picked up; ragged clouds began to scud across the sky. It grew even colder; ice bearded the decoys and crept along the edges of the marsh. Several flights went by, but none of the birds seemed interested in the decoys.

"Look," Conroy said uneasily at last. "We may not get as many chances as I thought. We'd better get our little affair settled, Charlie. Next time a bird comes in, hey?" His hand gripped Bannister's knee. "Bless you, old man. Good luck, always."

Bannister said nothing. He stared straight ahead of him at the bobbing decoys. His gun stood in the right-hand corner of the blind, loaded, ready. A faint rim of frost had formed on the barrels. The twin muzzles stared into the sky, sightless, ominous.

Conroy said suddenly, "There's a pair of blacks. Coming up the bay!"

Bannister looked to his left. He watched the two specks in the sky drive nearer, beating up against the wind. He saw them dip toward the decoys, then swing out again. The great hand that seemed to be squeezing his heart relaxed momentarily, then tightened again as the birds veered abruptly toward the blind. Conroy looked at him once; his face was grim. "Get set," he said.

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Bannister slipped off his gloves and reached for the gun. The metal was so cold that it seemed to stick to his fingers. Conroy turned away from him in a half crouch. The birds came driving in from the left, high. When they were eighty yards away, Conroy clicked off his safety. Seventy yards. Sixty. Conroy's muscles tensed. And then the birds flared out. Something had made them suspicious. They passed the blind just out of range. Bannister heard his breath go out of him in a whistling sigh. He said in a choked whisper, "Mike . . ."

"Keep still," Conroy muttered. "Keep down. They're coming back!"

It was true. The ducks were swinging downwind in a great circle. They had decided there was no danger. They were making another pass.

They came in low and fast. Sixty yards away they set their wings. They came on over the restless water as if drawn by invisible wires.

Fifty yards.

Forty.

Thirty-five.

Conroy stood up. The twelve-gauge bellowed; the lead duck collapsed in a bundle of feathers. The second mallard flared high, backpedaling. The wind caught him and whisked him away. Conroy's second barrel slammed; the bird faltered, dropped a wing, and plunged into the bay. Conroy stood rigid, his back to Bannister, waiting. The wind blew. The silence screamed around them.

Slowly Conroy turned his head. His face was gray; a trickle of blood ran down his chin from a bitten lip. "Damn you," he said in a hoarse, shaking voice. "Damn you, Charlie."

Bannister held up his gun slowly. "The safety," he said in a voice that he no longer recognized as his own. "I forgot to take off the safety."

Conroy's eyes moved from Bannister's sweating face down to the safety catch, then back again. He said, "You're lying, Charlie."

"No," Bannister said. "You'll see. Next time." He began to climb stiffly out of the blind, holding his gun in one hand.

"Where are you going?" Conroy's eyes were narrowed.

"Your second bird," Bannister said. "Only crippled."

He pointed. The duck, wing-tipped, was swimming away.

"Let it go," said Conroy.

"No," said Bannister. "No, I'll get it."

He launched the skiff and stepped in, feeling it lurch under his weight. He raised the long pole and drove it forward. His first thrusts were easy in the shallow water. Then the bottom shelved off steeply and he could barely reach it. Ahead of him he could see the duck, head flattened, snaking through the water. He picked up his gun and held it an inch or so from his shoulder. He did not bother to aim. He leaned back slightly and pulled the trigger. The gun slammed against his shoulder. He felt the skiff slide from under him. For a long moment he seemed to hang in the air. Then the water seized him.

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He had thought himself prepared for the shock. He was wrong.

The cold was beyond imagining. It struck him like a hammer, numbing yet agonizing. His legs were instantly paralyzed. He thrashed once or twice with his arms, then they ceased to function.

A pocket of air, trapped under his hunting jacket, gave him momentary buoyancy. Far away, dimly, he heard Conroy's bull voice roaring something, instructions or encouragement, he did not know which — or care. A curious languor crept over him. The cold no longer bothered him. He felt almost warm. He went under, mouth open, and an icy stream of water poured into his lungs. The pain, sharp and piercing, roused him and he began to struggle feebly. But now his sodden clothes were giving up their air cells. His boots had filled; they dragged him down. His hand touched something hard; his fingers curled around it in agony. The pole. It gave him a partial support that seemed to his tortured mind worse than no support at all. He tried to let it go, to sink, to be at rest, but his fingers were rigid, immovable, a frozen claw riveted around the length of oak.

For an eternity he wallowed miserably, his brain reeling. And then, with a crash that seemed to split his skull, something thudded alongside. A giant hand gripped his hair, then his collar. He felt himself dragged in one agonizing wrench from the numbing embrace of the bay. Conroy dropped him on the floor of the rowboat and lunged for the oars which were sliding away. He was roaring something at Bannister, but the words made no sense. The rowboat seemed to be spinning like a top. Bannister lay on the floorboards, shivering and retching. He wanted to die.

Incredibly, Conroy's big boot flicked out and caught him in the ribs. Hard. Conroy's words began to penetrate his numbed brain. "Get up! You'll freeze to death lying there. Get up and row! Get up, I say!"

"Let me alone," Bannister gasped. "Let me alone!"

Conroy leaned down and slapped his face. "Get up!" He put his hands under Bannister's armpits and raised him to a sitting position. He shook him until the icy spray flew from his hair. "Row!" he screamed. He dragged Bannister to a sitting position on the thwart, forced the oar handles under his blue fingers, then knelt behind him, his own hands covering Bannister's. He threw his weight back; the oars bit deep into the seething water. "Row!" yelled Conroy like a man possessed. "Row for the cabin. Row!"

"I can't," Bannister moaned. Every movement was agony. "Let me alone. Let me die."

"Die, hell!" howled Conroy. "You're going to live, you son of a — you're going to *live!*"

Afterward, in the superheated cabin, from under a mound of blankets, Bannister said feebly, "I tried to tell

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you last night, Mike. And I tried again this morning. You wouldn't listen."

Conroy was pouring whiskey into a cup of water. "Tell me what?"

"That nobody can be sure he's not needed. *That's* the reason for going on living, right up to the end. You saved a life today, two minutes after you planned to end your own. You can't say you weren't needed out there just now, can you?"

Conroy took a spoon out of the table drawer. "No, I can't say that." He stirred the drink slowly. "Tell the truth, I never thought of it quite that way, Charlie. Too busy thinking about myself, I guess."

He came over to the bunk and stood looking down at his friend. He said softly, "You didn't *plan* to fall overboard, did you, Charlie? Just to prove your point?"

The man under the blankets smiled faintly. "Nobody would be *that* foolish, would they, Mike?"

"I don't know," Conroy said. "I guess I'll never know."

Bannister took the cup from him with a hand that was mottled but fairly steady. He drank some, then put the cup on the floor. He settled back and closed his eyes. "How about it, Mike? Did I make my point?"

Conroy was looking out of the window at the wind-swept bay. Pretty soon, he knew, Keller would be coming to pick them up. "You try to get some sleep, Charlie," he said. "I'll stick around."

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# WHAT'S IN A NAME?

*Last October your Editors participated in an "autographing party" held in Kann's Department Store, Washington, D. C. For some hours we sat at a long line of bridge tables in the company of Leslie Ford, Pat McGerr, Georges Simenon, Anthony Boucher, Lawrence G. Blochman, Harold Q. Masur, and other stalwarts in the field. Actually, we sat next to Rex Stout, and between "signings" we discussed this and that, inevitably drifting into "shop" talk. We remember asking Mr. Stout a question that had been asked of us many times: How does an author pick the name of a detective? In Mr. Stout's case, how did he evolve the name of Nero Wolfe?*

*Strangely enough for him, Mr. Stout did not reply spontaneously; he sat there fingering his beard, a look of reflection on his face. It wasn't, we were sure, that he had no answer (in all the time we have known Mr. Stout, we have never seen him without an answer); no, it was as if he were deciding whether or not to answer the question at all. Then his eyes lit up and the expression around his mouth changed, and we swear it became one of amusement. Did we interpret the change in expression correctly? Judge for yourself, for here is the fascinating explanation Mr. Stout gave us:*

*It wasn't until long afterward, Mr. Stout insisted, that he realized the truth — that subconsciously he had patterned the name of Nero Wolfe after that of Sherlock Holmes, that from the beginning he must have sought a name which had an affinity with the name of The Master. Now, appellatively speaking, how in the world does Nero Wolfe resemble Sherlock Holmes? Well, one likeness is quickly apparent: both names have the same number and the same distribution of syllables: Sherlock has two, Holmes one; Nero likewise has two, Wolfe one. But this is a superficial kinship: the relationship is really far more subtle. Consider the vowels, and their placement, in the name Sherlock Holmes: Sherlock has two — e and o, in that order; Holmes also has two — the same two, but in reverse order — o-e. Now consider the vowels in Nero Wolfe: Nero has two — the same two as in Sherlock, and in exactly the same order! Wolfe also has two — the same two as in Holmes, and again in the same reverse order!*

*Coincidence? Hardly — and yet Mr. Stout claimed that he had not consciously planned the similarities . . . On further thought, we are inclined to accept Mr. Stout's story without reservations. Consider again:*



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*Sherlock — Nero — and delving further into detectivology, Lecoq; note the same e-o combination. And digging still more, could we not maintain that Simenon's Froget derives convincingly from Holmes? — the same o-e combination. But then why not go back to the fountainhead, the mainspring? Consider once again: Holmes — Wolfe — Froget (and how many others?) — don't they all stem from the original source? Poe — as you see, the same o-e combination.*

# WHEN A MAN MURDERS

*by REX STOUT*

"THAT'S JUST IT," SHE DECLARED, struggling to keep her voice steady. "We're not actually married." My brows went up. Many times, seated there at my desk in Nero Wolfe's office, I've eyed a female visitor to estimate how many sound reasons she might offer why a wedding ring would be a good buy. But usually I don't bother with those who are already hitched. So my survey of this specimen was purely professional, especially since her husband was along. Now, however, I changed focus. She would unquestionably grade high, after allowing for the crease in her forehead, the redness around her eyes, and the tension of her jaw muscles, tightening her lips. Making such allowances was nothing new for me, since most of the callers at that office are in trouble, seldom trivial.

Wolfe, who had just come down from the plant rooms on the roof and settled his impressive bulk in the oversized chair behind his desk, glared at her. "But you told Mr. Goodwin —" he began, stopped, and turned to me: "Archie?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir. A man on the phone said his name was Paul Aubry, and he and his wife wanted to see you as soon as possible, and I told him 6 o'clock. I didn't tell him to bring their marriage certificate."

"We have one," she said, "but it's no good." She twisted her head around and up. "Tell him, Paul."

She was in the red-leather chair near the end of Wolfe's desk. It's a roomy one, with big arms, and Paul Aubry was perched on one of them, with an arm extended across the back. I had offered him one of the yellow chairs, which are perfectly adequate, but apparently he preferred to stick closer to his wife.

"It's a real mess!" he blurted.

He wasn't red-eyed, but there was evidence that he was sharing the trouble. His hand on top of the chair back tightened into a fist. His fairly

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well-arranged face was grim, and his broad shoulders seemed to be hunched in readiness to meet an attack. He bent his head to meet her look.

"Don't you want to tell him?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, you." She put out a hand to touch his knee and then jerked it away.

His eyes went to Wolfe. "We were married six months ago — six months and four days — but now we're not married, according to the law. We're not married, because my wife — Caroline —" He paused to look at her, and, his train of thought interrupted, reached to take her hand. But it moved, and he didn't get it.

He stood up, squared his shoulders, faced Wolfe, and spoke faster and louder: "Four years ago she married a man named Sidney Karnow. A year later he enlisted in the Army and was sent to Korea. A few months after that she was officially informed that he was dead — killed in action. A year later I met her, and we fell in love. I asked her to marry me, but she wouldn't until two years had passed since Karnow died, and then she did. Three weeks ago he turned up alive — he phoned his lawyer here from San Francisco — and last week he got his army discharge, and Sunday, day before yesterday, he came to New York."

Aubrey hunched his shoulders, like Jack Dempsey ready to move in. "I'm not giving her up," he told the world. "I — will — not — give — her — up!"

Wolfe grunted. "It's fifteen million to one, Mr. Aubry."

"What do you mean, fifteen million?"

"The People of the State of New York. They're lined up against you, officially at least. I'm one of them. Why in heaven's name did you come to me? You should have cleared out with her days ago — Turkey, Australia, Burma, anywhere — if she was willing. It may not be too late if you hurry. *Bon voyage.*"

Aubry stood a moment, took a deep breath, turned, and went to the yellow chair I had placed, and sat. Becoming aware that his fists were clenched, he opened them, cupped his hands on his knees, and looked at Caroline. He lifted a hand and let it fall back to his knees. "I can't touch you," he said.

"No," she said. "Not while — no."

"Okay, you tell him. He might think I was bulling it. You tell him."

She shook her head. "He can ask me. I'm right here. Go ahead."

He turned to Wolfe: "It's like this. Karnow was an only child, and his parents are both dead. He inherited a pile, nearly two million dollars. He left a will giving half of it to my — to Caroline, and the other half to some relatives, an aunt and a couple of cousins. His lawyer had the will. After notice of his death came, it took several months to get the will probated and the estate distributed, on account of special formalities in a case like that. Caroline's share was a little over nine hundred thousand dollars, and

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when I met her she had it and was living on the income. All I had was a job selling cars, making around a hundred and fifty a week. But it was her I fell in love with, not the million, just for your information. When we got married it was her idea that I ought to buy an agency, but I'm not saying I fought it. I shopped around, and we bought a good one at a bargain, and —"

"What kind of agency?"

"Automobile." Aubry's tone implied that no other kind of agency was worth mentioning. "Brandon and Hiawatha. It took nearly half of Caroline's capital to swing it, but in the past three months we've cleared over twenty thousand after taxes, and the future was looking rosy — when this happened. I was planning to — but that's out now, I guess. This proposition we want to offer Karnow, it's not my idea and it's not Caroline's. It's ours. It just came out of all our talking and talking after we heard Karnow was alive. Last week we went to Karnow's lawyer, Jim Beebe, to get him to propose it to Karnow, but we couldn't persuade him. He said he knew Karnow too well — he was in college with him — and he knew Karnow wouldn't even listen to it. So we decided —"

"What was the proposal?"

"We thought it was a fair offer. We offered to turn it all over to him, the half-million Caroline has left and the agency, the whole works, if he would consent to a divorce. Also, I would continue to run the agency if he wanted to hire me. Also, Caroline would ask for no settlement and no alimony."

"It was my idea," she said.

"It was ours," he insisted.

Wolfe was frowning at them. My brows were up again. Evidently he really was in love with her and not with the dough, and I'm all for true love up to a point. As for her, my attitude flopped back to the purely professional. Granting that she was set to ditch her lawful husband, if she felt that this guy was worth a million bucks to her it would have taken too much time and energy to try to talk her out of it. Cocking an eye at his earnest face, which was passable but no pin-up, I would have said she was overpricing him. He went on:

"So, when Beebe wouldn't do it and we learned that Karnow had come to New York, we decided I'd better see him myself and put it up to him. We only decided that last night. I had some business appointments this morning, and this afternoon I went to his hotel — he's at the Churchill — and went up to his room. I didn't phone ahead, because I've never seen him, and I wanted to see him before I spoke with him. I wanted a look at him."

Aubry stopped to rub a palm across his forehead, pressing hard. When his hand dropped to his thigh, it became a fist again. He looked up and his brow wrinkled.

"One trouble," he said, "was that I wasn't absolutely sure what I was going to say. The main proposition,

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that was all right, but there were two other things in my mind. The agency is incorporated, and half of the stock is in Caroline's name and half in mine. Well, I could tell him that if he didn't take the offer I would hang onto my half and fight for it, but I hadn't decided whether to or not. The other thing, I could tell him that Caroline is pregnant. It wouldn't have been true, and I guess I wouldn't have said it, but it was in my mind. Anyhow it doesn't matter, because I didn't see him."

He clamped his jaw and then relaxed it. "This is where I didn't shine — I admit that — but it wasn't just cold feet. I went up to his room without phoning, and I lifted my hand to knock on the door, but I didn't because I was trembling. I was trembling all over. I stood there a while to calm down, but I didn't calm. I realized that if I went in there and put it to him and he said nothing doing, there was no telling what might happen. The way I was feeling, I was a lot more apt to queer it than help it. So I just ducked it. I'm not proud of it, but I'm telling you, I gave it a try and came away. Caroline was waiting for me downstairs, and I went and told her. That wasn't easy, either, telling her I had muffed it. Up to then she thought I could handle about anything that came along. She thought I was good."

"I still do, Paul," she told him.

"Yeah? I can't touch you."

"Not now. Not until —" Her hand fluttered. "Don't keep saying that."

"Okay, we'll skip it." He turned back to Wolfe: "So I told her the man-to-man approach was a bum idea, and we sat and chewed at it. We decided that none of our friends was up to it. The lawyer I use for the agency couldn't handle it. When one of us thought of you, I forget which, it clicked with both of us, and I went to a booth to phone for an appointment. Maybe you can get him down here and make the proposition yourself or, if he won't come, you can send Archie Goodwin to see him. Caroline has the idea it might be better to send Goodwin, because Karnow's thin-skinned and you might irritate him. We'll leave that to you. I wish I could say you can write your own ticket if he takes our offer. But if he does, we won't be any too flush, so I have to mention it. Five thousand dollars, something like that — we could manage that all right. But we've got to get it cleaned up — now, today, tonight!"

Wolfe cleared his throat. "I'm not a lawyer, Mr. Aubry; I'm a detective."

"I know that, but what's the difference? You have a reputation for getting things out of people. We want you to detect a way of getting Karnow to accept our proposition."

Wolfe grunted. "I could challenge your diction, but you're in no mood to debate semantics. And my fees are based on the kind and amount of work done. Your job seems fairly simple. In describing it to me, how candid have you been?"

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"Completely. Absolutely."

"Nonsense. Complete candor is beyond the reach of man or woman. If Mr. Karnow accepts your proposal, can I rely on you to adhere to its terms?"

"We'll stick to it."

Wolfe's head turned. "Mrs. Karnow, are you —?"

"She's not Mrs. Karnow!" Aubry barked. "She's my wife!"

Wolfe's shoulders went up half an inch and dropped back. "Madam, are you sure you understand the proposal and will faithfully adhere to it?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"You know that you will be relinquishing a dower right, a legal right, in a large property?"

"Yes."

"Then I must ask you a few questions about Mr. Karnow. You had no child by him?"

"No."

"You were in love when you married, presumably?"

"We thought — I guess we were. Yes."

"Did it cool off?"

"Not exactly." She hesitated, deciding how to put it. "Sidney was sensitive and high-strung — You see, I still say 'was' because for so long I've thought he was dead. I was only nineteen when we married, and I suppose I didn't know how to take him. He enlisted in the Army because he thought he should do his share of peeling potatoes — that was how he put it — but I didn't agree with him. But I knew by then that what I thought wasn't very important, nor what I felt, either. If you're going to try to get him to agree to this, of course you'll want to know what he's like. But I don't really know, myself, not after all this time. Maybe it would help for you to read the letters I got from him after he enlisted. He only sent me three, one from Camp Givens and two from Korea — he didn't like writing letters. My husb — Paul said I should bring them along to show you."

She opened her bag, fished in it, and produced some sheets of paper clipped together. I took them to Wolfe. I planted myself at his elbow and read the first one with him.

*Dear Carrie, my true and loving mate I hope:*

*Pardon me, but my weakness is showing. I would like to be where you are this minute and tell you why I didn't like your new dress, and you would go and put on another one, and we would go to the Bramford and eat snails and drink Richebourg, and then go to the Velvet Yoke and eat ladyfingers and drink tomato soup, and then we would go home and take hot baths and go to sleep on fine linen sheets spread over mattresses three feet thick, covered with an electric blanket. After several days of that, I would begin to recognize myself and would put my arms around you and we would drown in delight.*

*Now I suppose I should tell you enough about this place to make you understand why I would rather be*

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*somewhere else, but that would be too easy to bother with, and anyway, as you well know, I hate to write, and especially I hate to try to write what I feel. Since the time is getting closer and closer when I'll be at the front and have to kill somebody, I've been going through my memory for things about death. Montaigne said, "The deadest deaths are the best." I'll quote that to the man I'm going to kill and then he won't mind so much.*

*Speaking of death, if I don't come back, something I did before I left New York will give you quite a shock. I wish I could be around to see how you take it. You claim you have never worried about money, that it's not worth it. You've also told me that I always talk sardonic, but haven't got it in me to act sardonic. This will show you. I'll admit I have to die to get the last laugh, but that will be sardonic, too. I wonder do I love you or hate you? These emotions are hard to tell apart. Remember me in thy dreams.*

*Your sardonic*
*Kavalier Karnow*

I went to my desk to put the letters under a paperweight. Caroline spoke:

"I wrote him two long letters every week. I must have sent him over fifty letters, and he never mentioned them the few times he wrote. I want to try to be fair to him, but he always said he was egocentric, and I guess he was."

"Not *was*," Aubry said grimly. "*Is*. He *is*." He asked Wolfe, "Doesn't that letter prove he's a nut?"

"He is — uh — picturesque," Wolfe conceded. He turned to Caroline: "What had he done before he left New York that — upon his death — gave you quite a shock?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Naturally, I thought he had changed his will and left me out. After word came that he was dead I showed that letter to the lawyer, Jim Beebe, and told him what I thought, and he said it did sound like it, but there had been no change made in the will as far as he knew, and Sidney must have been stringing me."

"Not too adroitly," Wolfe objected. "It isn't so simple to disinherit a wife. However, since he didn't try . . . what do you know about the false report of his death?"

"Only a little from an item in the paper," she said, "but Jim Beebe told me more. Sidney was left for dead in the field in a retreat; but actually he was only stunned, and he was taken prisoner. He was a prisoner for nearly two years, and then he escaped, worked his way northward to the Yalu River, and crossed into Manchuria. By that time he could talk Chinese — he was wonderful with languages — and he made friends in a village and wore their clothes. What did you call him — picturesque? Maybe he was. Anyhow, a few months after the truce was signed and the fighting stopped he finally decided he had had enough of it, and went back across the Yalu and made his way to South Korea, where he reported to an army post, and they sent him home. And now he's here." She

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stretched her hands out. "Please, Mr. Wolfe. Please help us."

Though of course she didn't know it, that was bad tactics. Wolfe's reaction to an emotional appeal from a man is rarely favorable, and from a woman, never. He turned away from the painful sight.

"Archie. Are you willing to tackle this job?"

He was being polite. What he really meant was, "Five grand will pay a lot of salaries, including yours, and you will please proceed to earn it for me."

"I deeply appreciate it," I assured him. "If I say no, I won't hear the last of it for months, so I'll take a shot at it."

"Very well. We'll discuss it after dinner, and in the morning you can —"

They drowned him out, both of them cutting in to protest. They couldn't wait until tomorrow; they had to know. They protested to him and then appealed to me. Why put it off? Why not now? I don't react to emotional appeals the way Wolfe does, and I calmed them down by agreeing with them.

"Very well," Wolfe acquiesced, which was noble of him. "But you must have with you the proposal in writing, in duplicate, signed by Mr. Aubry and — uh — you, madam. You must sign it as Caroline Karnow. . . . Archie, at the bottom, on the left, type the word 'Accepted' and a colon. Under the circumstances, he would be a nincompoop not to sign it, but it would probably be imprudent to tell him so. Your notebook, please?"

I swiveled and got it from the drawer.

I rapped with my knuckles, smartly but not aggressively, on the door of Room 2318 on the twenty-third floor of the Hotel Churchill.

The clients had wanted to camp in Wolfe's office to await word from me, but I had insisted they be as near at hand as possible in case something developed. I left them downstairs in the hotel grill, hoping they'd grab a bite to eat. People in serious trouble have a tendency to eat too little or drink too much, or both.

I knocked again, louder and longer.

On the way in the taxi I had collected a little more information about Sidney Karnow, at least as he had been three years back. His attitude toward money had been somewhat superior, but he had shown no inclination to scatter his pile around regardless. So far as Caroline knew, he hadn't scattered it at all. He had been more than decent about meeting her modest requirements, and even anticipating them. That gave me no lead, but other details did. The key words were "egocentric," which was bad, and "proud," which was good. If he really had pride and wasn't just using it as a cover for something that wouldn't stand daylight, fine. No proud man would want to eat his breakfasts with a woman who was eager to cough up nearly a million bucks for the privilege of eating them

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with another guy. That, I had decided, was the tack to take.

Evidently the sizing up would be delayed, since my knocking got no response. Not wanting to risk a picturesque refusal to make an appointment, I hadn't phoned ahead. So I decided to go down and tell the clients that patience would be required for ten minutes or ten hours, take on a sandwich and a glass of milk, and then come up for another try. But before I turned away, my hand went automatically to the knob for a twist and a push, and the door opened. I stood a second, then pushed it a foot farther, stuck my head in, and called:

"Mr. Karnow! Karnow!"

No answer. I swung the door open and stepped inside. Beyond the light I was letting in was darkness, and I would probably have backed out and shut the door and beat it if I hadn't had such a good nose. When it told me there was a faint odor that I should recognize, and a couple of sniffs confirmed it, I found the wall switch and flipped it, and moved on in. A man was there, spread-eagled on the floor near an open door, flat on his back, a circle of blood near his head.

I took a step toward him — that was involuntary — then wheeled, closed the door to the hall, and returned. From the description Caroline had given me, it was Sidney Karnow. He was dressed, but without a jacket or tie. I squatted and slipped a hand inside his shirt and held my breath; nothing doing. I lifted his eyelid; it came stiffly and didn't want to go back. Actually, the temperature of the skin of his chest had told me what I wanted to know.

I stood up and looked down at him. It was unquestionably Karnow. I looked at my wrist watch and saw 7:22. Through the open door beyond him I could see the glitter of bathroom tiles and fittings, and, detouring around his outstretched arm, I went and squatted again for a close-up of two objects on the floor. One was a GI side arm, a .45. I didn't touch it. The other was a small pillow, and I knew, from a scorched hole and powder black, that it had been used to muffle the gun. I got erect and shut my eyes to think. It is my habit, long established, when I open doors where I haven't been invited, to avoid touching the knob with my fingertips. Had I followed it this time? I decided yes. Also, had I flipped the light switch with my knuckle? Again yes. Had I made prints anywhere else? No.

I crossed to the light switch and used my knuckle again, got out my handkerchief to open the door and pull it shut after me, took an elevator down to the lobby floor, found a phone booth and dialed a number. The voice that answered belonged to Fritz, the chef and housekeeper whose pay matches mine, and I admit he earns it. I asked for Wolfe.

Fritz was shocked. "But, Archie, he's at dinner!"

"Yeah, I know. Tell him I've been trapped by cannibals and they're slicing me, and step on it."

A full two minutes later Wolfe's

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outraged voice came: "Well, Archie?"

"No, sir. Not well. I'm calling from a booth in the Churchill lobby. I left the clients in the grill, went up to Karnow's room, found the door unlocked, and entered. Karnow was on the floor, dead, shot with an army gun. The gun's there, but it wasn't suicide. The gun was muffled with a pillow. How do I earn the five grand now?"

"Confound it, Archie, in the middle of a meal."

If you think that was put on, you're wrong. I know that fat genius. That was how he felt, and he said it, that's all.

I ignored it. "I left nothing in the room," I told him, "and I didn't have an audience, so we're fancy free. I know it's hard to talk with your mouth full, but —"

"Shut up." Silence for four seconds, then, "Did he die within the past ninety minutes?"

"No. The skin on his chest has started to cool off."

"Did you see anything suggestive?"

"No. I was in there maybe three minutes. I wanted to interrupt your dinner. I can go back and give it a whirl."

"Don't." He was curt. "There's nothing to be gained by deferring the discovery. I'll have Fritz notify the police anonymously. Bring Mr. Aubry and Mrs. Karnow. Have they eaten?"

"They may be eating now. I told them to."

"See that they eat, and then bring them here on a pretext — devise one."

"Don't tell them?"

"No. I'll tell them. Have them here in an hour and ten minutes, no sooner. I have barely started my dinner, and now this."

He hung up.

Crossing the lobby and proceeding along one of the long, wide, and luxurious corridors, near the entrance to the grill I was stopped by an old acquaintance, Tim Evarts, the first assistant house dick, only they don't call him that, of the Churchill. He wanted to chin, but I eased him off. If he had known that I had just found a corpse in one of his rooms and forgot to mention it, he wouldn't have been so chummy.

The big room was only half filled with customers at that hour. The clients were at a corner table and, as I approached, Aubry got up to grab a chair for me. I gave them both a mark for good conduct. Presumably they were on the edge of their seats to hear what Karnow had said, but they didn't yap or claw at me. When I was seated, I spoke:

"No answer to my knock. I'll have to try again. Meanwhile, let's eat."

Their disappointment was nothing but plain, wholesome disappointment.

"I can't eat now," Mrs. Karnow said wearily.

"I strongly advise it," I told her. "How about something light, like a piece of melon and a sturgeon sandwich? We can get that here. Then I'll try again, and if there's still no answer

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we'll see. You can't stick around here all night."

"He might show up any minute," Aubry suggested. "Or he might come in and leave again. Wouldn't it be better if you stayed up there?"

"Not on an empty stomach." I was firm. "And I'll bet Mrs. — What do I call you?"

"Oh, call me Caroline."

"I'll bet you haven't eaten for a week. You'd better refuel."

That was a tough half-hour. She did eat a little, and Aubry cleaned up a turkey sandwich and a hunk of cheese, but she was having a hard time to keep from showing that she thought I was a cold-blooded pig. Aubry, as the minutes went by, left no doubt of his attitude. It was pretty gloomy. I downed my coffee and told them to sit tight, got up, and went out and down the corridor to the men's room, locked myself in a cubicle against the chance that Aubry might appear, and stayed there a quarter of an hour. Then I returned to the bar, went to their table and told them, "No answer. I phoned Mr. Wolfe. He has an idea, and wants to see us right away. Let's go."

"What for?" Aubry demanded.

"Look," I said; "when Mr. Wolfe has an idea and wants me to hear it, I oblige him. So I'm going. You can stay here and soak in agony, or you can come along. Take your pick."

From their expressions it was a good guess that they were beginning to think that Wolfe was a phony and I was a slob, but since their only alternative was to call the deal off and start hunting another salesman for their line, they had to string along. After Aubry paid the check we left, and in the corridor I steered them to the left and around to an exit on a side street, to avoid the main lobby. By that time some city employees had certainly responded to Fritz's anonymous phone call to headquarters, and, from some remarks the Aubrys had made, I felt sure that they were known at the Churchill. The doorman who waved up a taxi for us called them by name.

At the old brownstone house on West 35th Street where Wolfe sleeps, eats, plays with his orchids, and works when he has to, I let us in with my key, and, closing the door, shot the chain bolt. As I escorted them down the hall to the office, a glance at my wrist told me it was 8:35, so I hadn't quite stretched it to the hour and ten minutes Wolfe had specified, but it was pretty close. He emerged from the door to the dining room, which is across the hall from the office, stood there while we filed in, and then followed, the look on his face as black as the coffee he had just been sipping. Crossing to his desk and lowering his overwhelming bulk into his chair, he growled at them:

"Sit down, please."

They stayed on their feet. Aubry demanded, "What's the big idea? Goodwin says you have one."

"You will please sit down," Wolfe said coldly. "I look at people I'm talking to, especially when I suspect them

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of trying to flummox me, and my neck is not elastic."

His tone made it evident that what was biting him was nothing trivial. Caroline sidled to the red-leather chair and sat on its edge. Aubry plopped on the yellow one and met Wolfe's level gaze.

"You suspect?" he asked quietly. "Who? Of what?"

"I think one of you has seen and talked with Mr. Karnow. Today. Perhaps both of you."

"What makes you think so?"

"I reserve that. Whether and when I disclose it depends on you. While complete candor is too much to expect, it should at least be approximated when you're briefing a man for a job you want done. When and where did you see Mr. Karnow, and what was said?"

"I didn't. I have never seen him. I told you that. What's the idea of this?"

Wolfe's head moved. "Then it was you, madam?"

Caroline was staring at him, her brow creased. "Are you suggesting that I saw my — that I saw Sidney Karnow today?"

"Precisely."

"Well, I didn't! I haven't seen him at all! And I want to know why you're suggesting that!"

"You will." Wolfe leaned forward and gave her his straightest and hardest look. She met it. He turned his head to the right and aimed the look at Aubry, who stared back.

The doorbell rang.

Fritz was in the kitchen doing the dishes, so I got up and went to the hall, flipped the switch of the light out on the stoop, and took a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door. What I saw deserved admiration. Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Manhattan Homicide West knew that the panel was one-way glass and he was visible, but he wasn't striking a pose. He just stood there, his big, broad pan a foot away from the glass, to him opaque, a dick doing his duty. I went and opened the door and spoke through the two-inch crack, which was all the chain bolt would allow:

"Hello, there. It wasn't me, honest."

"Okay, comic." His deep bass was a little hoarse as usual. "Then I won't take you. Let me in."

"For what?"

"I'll tell you. Do you expect me to talk through this crack?"

"Yes. If I let you in you'll tramp right over me to bust in on Mr. Wolfe, and he's in a bad humor. So am I. I can spare you ten seconds to loosen up. One, two, three, four —"

He cut me off: "You were just up at the Hotel Churchill. You left there about half an hour ago with a man named Paul Aubry and his wife, and got into a taxi with them. Where are they? Did you bring them here?"

"May I call you Purley?" I asked.

"Cut the clowning."

"All right, then I won't. After all these years you oughta know better. Eighty-seven and four-tenths per cent of the people, including licensed de-

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tectives, who are asked impertinent questions by cops, answer quick because they are either scared, or ignorant of their rights, or anxious to cooperate. That lets me out. Give me one reason why I should tell you anything about my movements or any companions I may have had, and make it good."

Silence. After a moment I added, "And don't try to avoid giving me a shock. Since you're homicide, someone is dead. Who?"

"Who do you think?"

"Huh-uh. I won't guess, because I might hit the right number and I'd be in the soup."

"I want to be around when you are. Sidney Karnow was killed in his room at the Churchill this afternoon. He was reported dead in Korea and had just turned up alive, and learned that his wife had married Paul Aubry. As if I'm telling you anything you don't know."

He couldn't see my face through the crack, so I didn't have to bother about managing it. I asked, "Karnow is murdered?"

"That's the idea. He was shot in the back of the head."

"Are you saying I knew about it?"

"Not so far. But you knew about the situation, since you were there with Aubry and the woman. I want 'em, and I want 'em now. Are they here? If not, where are they?"

"I see," I said judiciously. "I admit you have given me a reason. Be seated while I go take a look." I pushed the door shut, went back to the office and crossed to my desk, took a pencil and my memo pad, and wrote:

*Stebbins. Says K. murdered. We were seen leaving hotel. Asks are they here and if not where.*

I got up to hand it to Wolfe, and he took it in with a glance and slipped it into the top drawer of his desk. He looked at Caroline and then at Aubry. "You don't need me," he told them. "Your problem has been solved for you. Mr. Karnow is dead."

They gawked at him.

"Of course," he added, "you now have another problem which may be even thornier."

Caroline was stiff, frozen.

"I don't believe it," Aubry said harshly.

"It seems authentic," Wolfe declared. "Archie?"

"Yes, sir. Sergeant Stebbins of Homicide is out on the stoop. He says Karnow was murdered, shot in the back of the head, this afternoon in his room at the Churchill. Mr. Aubry and Mrs. Karnow were seen leaving the hotel with me, and he wants to know if they're here and, if not, where? He says he wants them."

"Good grief!" Aubry said.

Caroline had let out a gasp, but no word. She was still rigid. Her lips moved, and I thought she asked, "He's dead?" But it was too low to be sure.

Wolfe spoke: "So you have another problem. The police will give you a night of it, and possibly a week or a month. Mr. Stebbins cannot enter this house without a search warrant,

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and if you were my clients, I wouldn't mind letting him wait on the stoop while we considered the matter. But since the job you gave me is no longer feasible, I am no longer in your hire. I have on occasion welcomed an opportunity to plague the police, but never merely for pastime, so I must bid you good evening."

Caroline left her chair and went to Aubry with her hands out, and he took them and pulled her close.

"However," Wolfe continued, "I have a deep repugnance to letting the police take from my house people who have not been formally charged with a crime. There is a back way out, and Mr. Goodwin will take you by it if you feel that you would like a little time to discuss matters."

"No," Aubry said. "We have nothing to run from. Let him in."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not in my house, to drag you out. You're sure you don't want to delay it?"

"Yes."

"Archie, will you please handle it?"

I arose, told them, "This way, please," and headed for the door, but stopped and turned when I heard Caroline find her voice behind me.

"Wait a minute," she said, barely loud enough for me to get it. She was standing facing Aubry, gripping his lapels. "Paul, don't you think — ? Shouldn't we ask Mr. Wolfe — ?"

"There's nothing to ask him." Aubry was up, with an arm across her shoulders. "I've had enough of Wolfe. Come on, honey. We don't have to ask anybody anything."

They followed me into the hall. As Aubry was getting his hat from the rack I opened the door, leaving the chain bolt on, and spoke to Purley:

"What do you know? They were right here in the office. That's a break for you. Now, if —"

"Open the door!"

"In a moment. Mr. Wolfe is peevish and might irritate you, so if you'll remove yourself, on down to the sidewalk, I'll let them out and they are yours."

"I'm coming in."

"No. Don't even think of it."

"I want you, too."

"Yeah, I thought so. I'll be along shortly. Twentieth Street?"

"Now. With me."

"Again, no. I have to ask Mr. Wolfe if there's anything we wouldn't want to bother you with, and, if so, what. Where do I go, Twentieth Street?"

"Yes, and not tomorrow."

"Glad to oblige. The subjects are here at my elbow, so just descend the steps — and be careful, don't fall."

He muttered something I didn't catch, turned, and started down. When he was at the bottom of the seven steps, I removed the bolt, swung the door open, and turned to our former clients.

"Okay. In return for the sandwiches and coffee, here's a suggestion. Don't answer any questions until you've got a lawyer and talked with him. Even if —"

I stopped because my audience was going. Aubry had Caroline's arm as

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they crossed the stoop and started down. Not wishing to give Purley the pleasure of having me watch him take them, I shut the door, replaced the bolt, and returned to the office. Wolfe was leaning back with his eyes closed.

"I'm wanted," I said. "Do I go?"

"Of course," he growled.

"Are we saving anything?"

"No. There's nothing to save."

"The letters from Karnow to his wife are in my desk. Do I take them along?"

"No. They are her property and doubtless she will claim them."

"Did I discover the body?"

"Certainly not. To what purpose?"

"None. Don't worry if I'm late."

I went to the hall for my hat and beat it.

Since I wasn't itching to oblige Homicide, and it was a pleasant evening for a walk, I decided to hoof the fifteen blocks to Twentieth Street, and also to do a little chore on the way. If I'd done it in the office, Wolfe would have pulled his dignity on me and pretended to be outraged, though he knew as well as I did that it's always desirable to get your name in the paper, provided it's not in the obituary column. So I stopped at a phone booth in a drugstore on Tenth Avenue, dialed the *Gazette* number, asked for Lon Cohen, and got him.

"Scrap the front page," I told him, "and start over. If you don't want it, I'll sell it elsewhere. Did you happen to know that Paul Aubry and his wife, Mrs. Sidney Karnow to you, called on Nero Wolfe this afternoon, and I went somewhere with them, and brought them back to Mr. Wolfe's office, and fifteen minutes ago Sergeant Purley Stebbins came and got them? Or maybe you don't even know that Karnow was murd —"

"Yeah, I know that. What's the rest of it? Molasses you licked off your fingers?"

"Nope. Guaranteed straight as delivered. I just want to get my employer's name in the paper. Mine is spelled A, R, C, H —"

"I know that, too. Who else has this?"

"From me, nobody. Only you, son."

"What did they want Wolfe to do?"

Of course, that was to be expected. Give a newspaperman an inch and he wants a column. I finally convinced him that this was all for now and resumed my way downtown.

At Manhattan Homicide West on Twentieth Street I was hoping to be assigned to Lieutenant Rowcliff so I could try once more to make him mad enough to stutter, but I got a college graduate named Eisenstadt, who presented no challenge. All he wanted was facts, and I dished them out, withholding, naturally, that I had entered the room. It took less than an hour, including having my statement typed and signed. I declined his pressing invitation to stick around until Inspector Cramer got in. I told him another fact — that I was a citizen in good standing, or fair at least,

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with a known address, and could be found if and when needed.

Back at the office, Wolfe was yawning at a book. The yawn was an act. He wanted to make it clear to me that losing a fee of five grand was nothing to get riled about. I had a choice: either proceed to rile him, or go to bed. They were equally attractive, and I flipped a quarter and caught it. He didn't ask me what I was deciding because he thought I wanted him to. It was heads, and I told him my session at Homicide wasn't worth reporting, said good night, and mounted the two flights to my room.

In the morning, at breakfast, in the kitchen with Fritz supplying me with hot griddlecakes and the paper propped in front of me, I saw I had given Lon Cohen not one inch, but two. He had stretched it because it was exclusive. Aside from that, there was a pile of miscellaneous information about Karnow's Aunt Margaret, who was Mrs. Raymond Savage, her son Richard, and her daughter Ann, now married to one Norman Horne. There was a picture of Ann, and a not very good one of Caroline.

I seldom see Wolfe in the morning until eleven, when he comes down from the plant rooms, and that morning I didn't see him at all. A little after ten a call came from Sergeant Stebbins inviting me to drop in at the District Attorney's office at my earliest inconvenience. I don't apologize for taking only four minutes to put weights on papers on my desk, phone up to Wolfe, and get my hat and go, because there was a chance of running into our former clients, and they might possibly be coming to the conclusion that they hadn't had enough of Wolfe, after all.

I needn't have been in such a hurry. I sat for nearly half an hour on a hard wooden chair in the anteroom. I was about ready to go over to the window and tell the switchboard operator that another three minutes was all I could spare, when another female appeared. The way she moved was worthy of study, her face invited a full analysis, her clothes deserved a complete inventory, and either her name was Ann Savage Horne or the *Gazette* had run the wrong picture.

She saw me taking her in and reciprocated frankly, her head cocked a little to one side. She walked over and sat on a chair near mine, and gave me the kind of straight look that you expect only from a queen or a trollop.

"What's that stole?" I asked her. "Rabbit?"

She smiled to dazzle me and darned near made it. "Where did you get the idea," she asked back, "that vulgarity is the best policy?"

"It's not policy; I was born vulgar. When I saw your picture in the paper I wondered what your voice was like, and I wanted to hear it. Talk some more."

"Oh. You're one up on me."

"I don't mind squaring it. I'm called Goodwin — Archie Goodwin."

"Goodwin?" She frowned a little. She brightened. "Of course! You're

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in the paper, too — if you're that one. You work for Nero Wolfe?"

"I practically *am* Nero Wolfe, when it comes to work. Where were you yesterday afternoon from eleven minutes past two until eighteen minutes to six?"

"Let's see. I was walking in the park with my pet flamingo. If you think that's no alibi, you're wrong. My flamingo can talk. Ask me some more."

"Can your flamingo tell time?"

"Certainly. It wears a wrist watch on its neck."

"How can it see it?"

She nodded. "I knew you'd ask that. It has been trained to tie its neck in a knot, just a plain single knot, and when it does that the watch is on a bend, so that — Well, Mother?" She was suddenly out of her chair and moving. "What, no handcuffs on anybody?"

Her mother, Sidney Karnow's Aunt Margaret, emerged from the corridor leading a procession. She would have made two of her daughter Ann, and more than half of Nero Wolfe. She was large not only in bulk, but also in facial detail, large features so big that space above her chin was at a premium. Beside her was a thin, pleasant-looking young man wearing black-rimmed glasses. Behind them were two other males, one obviously, from his resemblance to Mother, Ann's brother Dick, and the other a tall, loose-jointed specimen who would have been called distinguished-looking by any woman between sixteen and sixty. As I made my swift survey the flamingo trainer talked on:

"Mother, this is Mr. Goodwin, the Archie Goodwin who was at the Churchill yesterday with Caroline and Paul. He's grilling me. Mr. Goodwin, my mother, my brother Dick, my husband, Norman Horne — no, not the one with the cheaters. That's Jim Beebe, the lawyer to end all laws — *This* is my husband." The distinguished-looking one had pushed by and was beside her. She was flowing on: "You know how disappointed I was at the district attorney being so polite to us, but Mr. Goodwin is different. He's going to give me the third degree, physically I mean. He's built for it, and I expect I'll go to pieces and confess —"

Her husband's palm, pressed over her mouth, firm but not rough, stopped her. "You talk too much, darling," he said tolerantly.

"It's her sense of humor," Aunt Margaret explained. "All the same, Ann dear, it *is* out of place, with poor Sidney just cruelly murdered."

"Nuts!" Dick Savage snapped.

"It *was* cruel," his mother insisted. "Murder *is* cruel."

"Sure, it is," he agreed, "but for us Sid has been dead more than two years, and he's been alive again only two weeks, and we never even saw him, so what do you expect?"

"I suggest," Beebe, the lawyer, hurriedly put in, "that this is rather a public spot for a private discussion. Shall we go?"

"I can't," Ann declared. "Mr.

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Goodwin is going to wear me down and finally break me. Look at his hard gray eyes. Look at his jaw."

"No, darling," Norman Horne said affectionately, and took her elbow and started her toward the door. The others filed after them, with Beebe in the the rear. As I stood and watched the door closing behind them, the receptionist spoke:

"Mr. Mandelbaum will see you, Mr. Goodwin."

Only two assistant district attorneys rate corner rooms, and Mandelbaum wasn't one of them. Halfway down the corridor his door was standing open, and, entering, I had a surprise. Mandelbaum, middle-aged and plump, was at his desk, and across from him, on one of the two spare chairs, was a big, husky guy with graying hair, a broad red face, and gray eyes that had given tougher babies than Mrs. Norman Horne some trouble. If she called my eyes hard she should have seen those of Inspector Cramer of Homicide.

"I'm honored," I said appreciatively, and accepted Mandelbaum's invitation to use the third chair.

"Look at me," Cramer commanded.

I hoisted my eyebrows, which always annoys him.

"I'm late for an appointment," he said, "so I'll cut it short. I've just been up to see Wolfe. Of course, he corroborates you, and he says he has no client. I've read your statement. I'm telling you frankly that we have no proof you entered that hotel room."

"Now I can breathe again," I said.

"Yeah. The day you stop, I'll eat as usual. We have no proof, as yet, that you went in that room, but I know damn' well you did. We were tipped off about the body by an anonymous phone call — obviously a disguised voice. You won't deny that I pretty well know by now how you react to situations."

"Sure. Boldly, bravely, and brilliantly."

"I only say I know. Leaving Aubry and Mrs. Karnow down in the grill, you go up and knock on the door of Karnow's room, and get no answer. In that situation there's not a chance in a thousand that you'd leave without trying the knob."

"Then I must have."

"So you did?"

I stayed patient and reasonable: "Either I didn't try the knob —"

"Can it. Of course you did, and you found the door wasn't locked. So you opened it, and called Karnow's name, and got no answer, and you went in and saw the body. That I know, because I know you, and also because of what followed. You went down to the grill and sat with them a while, and then took them back to Wolfe. Why? Because you knew Karnow had been murdered. If you had merely gone away when your knock wasn't answered, you would have stuck there until Karnow showed, even if it took all night. And that's not half of it. When Stebbins went to Wolfe's place after them, with no warrant and no charge entered, Wolfe meekly handed them over! He said they were no

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longer his clients, since Stebbins had brought the news that Karnow was dead. But why weren't they? Because he won't take a murderer for a client knowingly, and he thought Aubry had killed Karnow. That's why."

I shook my head. "Gee, if you already know everything, I don't see why you bother with me."

"I want to know exactly what you did in that room, and whether you changed anything or took anything." Cramer leaned to me: "Look, Goodwin; I advise you to unload. The way it's going, I fully expect Aubry to break before the day's out, and when he does we'll have it all, including what you told them you saw in Karnow's room when you rejoined them in the grill, and why the three of you returned to Wolfe's place. If you let me have it now, I won't hold it against you that — What are you grinning for?"

"I'm thinking of Mr. Wolfe's face when I tell him this. When Stebbins came with the news that Karnow was dead, and the job went out the window, Mr. Wolfe hinted as far as his dignity would let him that he'd consider another job if they had one. But they side-stepped it. So this will upset him. He keeps telling me we mustn't get discouraged, that some day you will be right about something, but this will be a blow —"

Cramer got up and tramped from the room.

I let Mandelbaum have the tail end of the grin. "Is he getting more sensitive?"

"Some day," the Assistant D.A. declared, "certain people are going to decide that Wolfe and you are doing more harm than good, and you won't have so much fun without a license. I'm too busy to play games. Beat it."

When I got back to Thirty-Fifth Street, a little after noon, Wolfe was at his desk fiddling with stacks of cards from the files, plant germination records. I asked if he wanted a report of my visit with Mandelbaum and Cramer, and he said none was needed because he had talked with Cramer and knew the nature of his current befuddlement. I told him I had met Karnow's relatives and also his lawyer, and would he care for my impressions. I got no reply but a rude grunt, so I passed it and went to my desk to finish some chores that had been interrupted by Stebbins's phone call. I had just started in when the doorbell rang. I went to the hall to answer it.

Caroline Karnow was there on the stoop. I opened the door. She stepped in.

"I want to see Mr. Wolfe," she blurted, and proved it by going right on, to the office door and in. I'm supposed to block visitors until I learn if Wolfe will see them, but it would have taken a flying tackle, and I let her go and merely followed. By the time I got there, she was sitting in the red-leather chair as if she owned it.

Wolfe, a germination card in each hand, was scowling at her.

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"They've arrested him," she said. "For murder."

"Naturally," Wolfe growled.

"But he didn't do it!"

"Also naturally. I mean, naturally you would say that."

"But it's true! I want you to prove it."

Wolfe shook his head. "Not required. They must prove he did. You're all tense, madam. Too tense. Have you eaten today?"

"Good lord," she said, "all you two think about is eating! Last night him, and now —"

She started to laugh, at first a sort of gurgle, and then really out with it. I got up and went to her, took her head between my hands to turn her face up, and kissed her on the lips unmistakably. With some customers that's more satisfactory than a slap, and just as effective. I paid no attention to her first convulsive jerks, and released her head only when she quit shaking and got hold of my hair. I pulled loose and backed up a step.

"What on earth —?" she gasped.

I decided she had snapped out of it, and went to the kitchen and asked Fritz to bring crackers and milk and hot coffee, and returned. As I sat at my desk she stared at me.

"Did you have to do that?"

"Look," I said; "evidently you came to get Mr. Wolfe to help you. He can't stand hysterical women, and in another four seconds he would have been out of the room and would have refused to see you again. I am going on talking to give both you and Mr. Wolfe a chance to calm down. If you think it's undesirable to be kissed by me, I'm willing to submit it to a vote by people who ought to know."

She was passing her hands over her hair. "I suppose I should thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Are you recovered," Wolfe rasped, "or not?"

"I'm all right." She swallowed. "I haven't slept, and it's quite true I haven't eaten anything, but I'm all right. They've arrested Paul for murder. He wants me to get a lawyer, and of course I must, but I don't know who. The one he uses in business is no good for this, and I don't want to ask Jim Beebe and two other lawyers I know — I don't think they're much good. I told Paul I was coming to you, and he said all right."

"You want me to recommend a lawyer?"

"Yes, but we want you, too. We want you to do — well, whatever you do." Suddenly she was flushing, and the color was good for her face. "Paul says you charge very high, but I suppose I have lots of money again, now that Sidney is dead." The flush deepened. "I've got to tell you something: Last night when you told us about it, that Sidney had been murdered, for just one second I thought Paul had done it. One awful second."

"I know you did. Only, I would say ten seconds. Then you went to him."

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"Yes. I went and touched him and let him touch me, and then it was over, but it was horrible. Do you believe Paul killed him?"

"No," Wolfe said flatly.

"You're not just saying that?"

"I never just say anything." Wolfe suddenly realized that he had swiveled his chair away from her when she started to erupt, and now swung it back. "Mr. Cramer, a policeman, came this morning and twitted me for having let a murderer hoodwink me. When he had gone, I considered the matter. It would have to be that Mr. Aubry, having killed Mr. Karnow, and having discussed it with you, decided to come and engage me to deal with Karnow in order to establish the fact that he didn't know Karnow was dead. That is Mr. Cramer's position, and I reject it. I sat here for an hour yesterday, listening to Mr. Aubry and looking at him, and if he had just come from killing the man he was asking me to deal with, I am a dolt. Since I *am not* a dolt, Mr. Aubry is not a murderer. Therefore — Yes, Fritz. Here's something for you, madam."

I would like to think it was my kiss that gave her an appetite, but I suppose it was the assurance from Wolfe that he didn't think her Paul was guilty of murder. She disposed of the crackers and milk, and also of a healthy portion of toast spread with Fritz's liver pâté and chives, while Wolfe busied himself with the cards and I found something to do on my desk.

"I do thank you," she said. "This is wonderful coffee. I feel better."

It is so agreeable to Wolfe to have someone enjoy food that he had almost forgiven her for losing control. He nearly smiled at her.

"You must understand," he said gruffly, "that if you hire me to investigate, there are no reservations. I think Mr. Aubry is innocent, but if I find he isn't, I am committed to no evasion or concealment. You understand that?"

"Yes. I don't — all right."

"For counsel I suggest Nathaniel Parker. Inquire about him if you wish; if you settle on him we'll arrange an appointment. Now, if Mr. Aubry didn't kill Karnow, who did?"

No reply.

"Well?" Wolfe demanded.

She put the coffee cup down. "Are you asking me?"

"Yes."

"I don't know."

"Then we'll return to that. You said Mr. Aubry has been arrested for murder. Has that charge been entered, or is he being held as a material witness?"

"No — murder. They said I couldn't get bail for him."

"Then they must have cogent evidence, surely something other than the manifest motive. He has talked, of course?"

"He certainly has."

"He has told of his going to the door of Karnow's room yesterday afternoon?"

"Yes."

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"Do you know what time that was?"

"Half-past 3. Very close to that."

"Then opportunity is established, and motive. As for the weapon, the published account says it was Karnow's. Has that been challenged?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then the formula is complete. But a man cannot be convicted by a formula, and should not be charged by one. Have they got evidence? Do you know?"

"I know one thing." She was frowning at him, concentrated, intent. "They told Paul that one of his business cards was found in Sidney's pocket, the agency name and address, with his name in the corner. They asked him to account for it. He told them that he and his salesmen hand out dozens of cards every day, and Sidney could have got one in many different places. Then they told him this card had his fingerprints on it, clear, fresh ones, and asked him to account for that."

"Could he?"

"He didn't to them, but he did to me later, when they let me see him."

"How did he account for it?"

She hesitated. "He had remembered that last Friday afternoon, when he went to a conference at Jim Beebe's office, he left one of his cards there on Jim's desk."

"Who was at the conference?"

"Besides Paul, and Jim of course, there was Sidney's Aunt Margaret — Mrs. Savage — and Dick Savage, and Ann and her husband."

"Were you there?"

"No. I — I didn't want to go. I'd had enough of all the talk."

"You say he left one of his cards on Mr. Beebe's desk. Do you mean he remembers that the card was on the desk when he left the conference?"

"Yes, he's pretty sure it was. But, anyway, he left first. All the others were still there."

"Has Mr. Aubry now told the police of this?"

"I don't think so. He said he wouldn't because he thought it would look as if he were trying to accuse one of Sidney's relatives, and that would hurt more than it would help. That was why I didn't like to tell you about it, but I knew I had to."

Wolfe grunted. "You did indeed, madam. You are in no position to afford the niceties of decent reticence. Since your husband was almost certainly killed by someone who was mortally inconvenienced by his resurrection, and we are excluding you and Mr. Aubry, his other heirs invite scrutiny and will get it. According to what Mr. Aubry told me yesterday, there are three of them — Mrs. Savage, her son, and her daughter. Where is Mr. Savage?"

"He died years ago. Mrs. Savage is Sidney's mother's sister."

"She got, as did her son and her daughter, nearly a third of a million. What did that sum mean to her? What were her circumstances?"

"I guess it meant a great deal. She wasn't well off."

"What was she living on?"

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"Well — Sidney had been helping her."

Wolfe tightened his lips and turned a palm up. "My dear madam. Be as delicate as you please about judgments, but I merely want facts. Must I drag them out of you? A plain question — Was Mrs. Savage living on Mr. Karnow's bounty?"

She swallowed. "Yes."

"What has she done with her legacy? Has she conserved it? Give me the facts as you know them."

"No, she hasn't." Caroline's chin lifted a little. "You're quite right, I'm being silly — and, anyway, lots of people know all about it. Mrs. Savage bought a house in New York, and last winter she bought a villa in southern France, and she wears expensive clothes and gives big parties. I don't know how much she has left. Dick had a job with a downtown broker, but he quit when he got the inheritance from Sidney, and he is still looking for something to do. He is — Well, he likes to be with women. It's hard to be fair to Ann because she has wasted herself. She is beautiful and clever, and she's only twenty-six. But there she is, married to Norman Horne, just throwing herself away."

"What does Mr. Horne do?"

"He tells people about the time twelve years ago when he scored four touchdowns for Yale against Princeton."

"Is that lucrative?"

"No. He says he isn't fitted for a commercial society. I can't stand him, and I don't understand how Ann can. They live in an apartment on Park Avenue, and she pays the rent, and, as far as I know, she pays everything. She must."

"Hm-m," Wolfe sighed. "So that's the job. While Mr. Aubry's motive was admittedly more powerful than theirs, since he stood to lose not only his fortune, but also his wife, they were by no means immune to temptation. How much have you been associating with them the past two years?"

"Not much. With Aunt Margaret and Dick, almost not at all. I used to see Ann fairly often, but very little since she married Norman Horne."

"When was that marriage?"

"Two years ago. Soon after the estate was distributed." She stopped, and then decided to go on: "That was one of Ann's unpredictable somersaults. She was engaged to Jim Beebe, announced publicly and the date set, and then, without even bothering to break it off, she married Norman Horne."

"Was Mr. Horne a friend of your husband's?"

"No, they never met. Ann found Norman — I don't know where. They wouldn't have been friends even if they had met, because Sidney wouldn't have liked him. There weren't many people Sidney did like."

"Did he like his relatives?"

"No. If you want facts, he didn't. But he did feel they were his responsibility."

"I see." Wolfe leaned back and closed his eyes, and his lips began to work, pushing out and then pulling

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in, out and in, out and in. He only does that when he has something substantial to churn around in his skull. But that time I thought he was being a little premature, since he hadn't even seen them yet, not one. Caroline started to say something, but I shook my head at her and she subsided.

Finally Wolfe opened his eyes and spoke: "You understand, madam, that the circumstances — particularly the finding of Mr. Aubry's card, bearing his fingerprints, on the body — warrant an explicit assumption: that your husband was killed by one of the six persons present at the conference in Mr. Beebe's office Friday afternoon. Eliminating Mr. Aubry, five are left. You know them all, if not intimately, at least familiarly, and I ask you, is one of them more likely than another? For any reason at all?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Do we have to — is this the only way?"

"It is. That's our assumption until it's discredited. I want your best answer."

"I don't know," she insisted.

I decided to contribute. "I doubt," I put in, "if this would be a good buy at a nickel, but this morning, at the D.A.'s office, I met the whole bunch. I had a little chat with Mrs. Horne, who seems to like gags, and when the others appeared she introduced me to them. She told them I was going to give her the third degree, and she added, I quote, 'I expect I'll go to pieces and confess —' Unquote. At that point Horne put his hand on her mouth and told her she talked too much. Mrs. Savage said it was her sense of humor."

"That's like Ann," Caroline said. "Exactly like her, at her worst."

Wolfe grunted. "Mr. Goodwin has a knack for putting women at their worst. He's no help, and neither are you. You seem not to realize that unless I can expose one of those five as the murderer of your husband, Mr. Aubry is almost certainly doomed."

"I do realize it. It's awful, but I do." Her lips tightened. In a moment she spoke: "And I want to help! All night I was trying to think, and one thing I thought of — what Sidney said in his letter about something that would shock me. You said yesterday it's not simple to disinherit a wife, but couldn't he have done it some other way? Couldn't he have signed something that would give someone a claim on the estate, perhaps the whole thing? Isn't there some way he could have arranged for the — shock?"

"Conceivably," Wolfe admitted. "But there would have had to be an authentic transfer of ownership and possession, and there wasn't. Or if he established a trust, it would have had to be legally recorded, and the estate would never have been distributed. You'll have to do better than that." He cleared his throat explosively and straightened up. "Very well. I must tackle them. Will you please have them here at 6 o'clock, madam?"

Her eyes widened at him. "Me? Bring them here?"

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"Certainly."

"But I can't! How? What could I say? I can't tell them that you think one of them killed Sidney, and you want — No! I can't!" She came forward in the chair. "Don't you see it's just impossible? Anyhow, they wouldn't come!"

Wolfe turned. "Archie. You'll have to get them. I prefer 6 o'clock, but if that isn't feasible, after dinner will do." He glanced up at the wall clock. "Phone Mr. Parker and make an appointment for Mrs. Karnow. Phone Saul and tell him I want him here as soon as possible. Then lunch. After lunch, proceed." He turned to the client: "Will you join us, madam? Fritz's rice and mushroom fritters are, if I may say so, palatable."

Since this is a democracy, thank God, please prepare to vote. All those in favor of my describing in full detail my five hours of effort to fill Wolfe's order for three males and two females, say aye. I hear none. Since my eardrums are sensitive, I won't ask for the no's.

Then I'll sketch it:

James M. Beebe, I found, was not one of the machines in the huge legal factories that occupy so many floors in New York's skyscrapers. He was soloing it in a small office on the tenth floor of a mid-town building. The woman in the anteroom, apparently the only employee, said Mr. Beebe would be back soon. If you call thirty-five minutes soon, he was.

The inner room we entered must have been a little cramped with a conference of six people. Its furniture was adequate, but by no means ornate. When I showed him my credentials, a note signed by Caroline Karnow saying that Nero Wolfe was acting for her, and told him that Wolfe would like to discuss the situation with those chiefly concerned that evening, he said he understood that the police investigation was making progress, and that he questioned the wisdom of an investigation of a murder by a private detective.

Wise or not, I said, Mrs. Karnow surely had the right to hire Wolfe if she wanted to. He conceded that. Also, surely, the widow of his former friend and client might reasonably expect him to cooperate in an effort to discover the truth. Wasn't that so?

He looked uncomfortable. "It's like this, Mr. Goodwin," he said. "I sympathize deeply with Mrs. Karnow, of course. But I'm under no obligation to her, only to my late friend and client, Sidney Karnow. I certainly will do anything I can to help discover the truth. But it's justifiable to suppose that in employing Nero Wolfe, Mrs. Karnow's primary purpose, if not her sole purpose, is to save Paul Aubry. As an officer of the law, I cannot conscientiously participate in that. I am not Aubry's attorney. I beg you to understand."

I kept after him. He stood pat. Finally, following instructions from Wolfe, I put a question to him:

"I suppose you won't mind helping to clear up a detail. At a conference in

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this room last Friday afternoon, Aubry left one of his business cards on your desk. It was there when he left. What happened to it?"

He cocked his head and frowned. "Here on my desk?"

"Right."

The frown deepened. "I'm trying to remember — Yes, I do remember. He suggested I might phone him later, and he put it there."

"What happened to it?"

"I don't know."

"Did you phone him?"

"No. As it turned out, there was no occasion to."

"Would you mind seeing if the card is around? It's fairly important."

"Why is it important?"

"That's a long story. But I would like very much to see that card. Will you take a look?"

He wasn't enthusiastic about it, but he obliged. He looked among and under things on top of his desk, including the blotter, in the desk drawers, and around the room some, even on top of a filing cabinet. I got down on my knees to see under the desk. No card.

I scrambled to my feet. "May I ask your secretary?"

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

"Nothing you would care to participate in. But the easiest way to get rid of me is to humor me on this one little detail."

He lifted the phone and spoke to it, and in a moment the door opened and the employee entered. He told her I wanted to ask her something, and I did so. She said she knew nothing about any card of Paul Aubry's. She had never seen one, on Beebe's desk or anywhere else, last Friday or any other day. That settled, she backed out, pulling the door shut after her.

"It's a little discouraging," I told Beebe. "I was counting on collecting that card. Are you sure you don't remember seeing one of the others pick it up?"

"I've told you all I remember — that Aubry put a card on my desk."

"Was there an opportunity for one of them to pick it up without your noticing?"

"There might have been. I'm not sure what you're trying to establish, Mr. Goodwin. But probably, during the meeting here on Friday, I had occasion to leave this chair to get something from my files. I won't say that gave someone an opportunity to remove something from my desk, but I can't prohibit you from saying so." He got to his feet and smiled ruefully. "I'm sorry I can't be more helpful."

"So am I," I said emphatically. I arose and turned to go, but when I was halfway to the door he called:

"Mr. Goodwin."

I turned. He had left his chair and was standing at the end of the desk, stiff and straight.

"I'm a lawyer," he said in a different tone, "but I am also a man. Speaking as a man, I ask you to consider my position. My friend and client has been murdered, and the police are apparently convinced that they have

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the murderer in custody. Nero Wolfe, acting for Mrs. Karnow, wants to prove them wrong. His only hope of success is to fasten the guilt elsewhere. Isn't that the situation?"

"Roughly, yes."

"And you ask me to cooperate. You mentioned a conference in this office last Friday. Besides myself, there were five people here — you know who they were. None of them was, or is, my client. They were all dismayed by the return of Sidney Karnow alive. They were all in dread of personal financial calamity. They all asked me, one way or another, to intercede for them. I have, of course, given this information to the police, and I see no impropriety in my giving it also to Nero Wolfe. Beyond that, I have absolutely no information or evidence that could possibly help him. I tell you frankly, if Paul Aubry is guilty, I hope he is convicted and punished; but if one of the others is guilty, I hope he — or she — is punished, and if I knew anything pertinent to that end, I certainly would not withhold it."

He lifted a hand and dropped it. "All I'm trying to say — as a lawyer I'm not supposed to be vindictive, but as a man perhaps I am a little. Whoever killed Sidney Karnow should be punished." He turned and went back to his chair.

"Fine sentiment," I agreed.

On the way to the next customer, I found a booth and phoned Wolfe a report. All I got in return was a series of grunts.

The house Mrs. Savage had bought was in the Sixties, east of Lexington Avenue. I am not an expert on Manhattan real estate, but after a look at the narrow gray-brick, three-layer item, my guess was that it had set her back a cool hunk of her three hundred thousand. When there was no answer to my rings, I felt cheated. I hadn't expected anything as lavish as a dolled-up butler, but — not even a maid to receive detectives?

It was only a ten-minute walk to the Park Avenue address of Mr. and Mrs. Norman Horne. My luck stayed stubborn. The hallman said they were both out, phoned up at my request, and got no answer.

I like to walk around Manhattan, catching glimpses of its wild life, the pigeons and cats and girls, but that day I overdid it, back and forth between my two objectives. Finally, from an ambush in a diner on Sixty-Eighth Street, I saw Aunt Margaret navigate the sidewalk across the street and enter the gray brick. I left the diner, crossed over, and pushed the button. She opened the door a few inches, thought she saw a journalist, said, "I have nothing to say," and would have closed the door if it hadn't been for my foot.

"Wait a minute," I objected, "we've been introduced. By your daughter, this morning. The name is Archie Goodwin."

She let the door come open another inch for a better view of me, and the pressure of my foot kept it going. I crossed the threshold.

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"Of course," she said. "We were rude to you, weren't we? That I have nothing to say is what they told me I must say to everybody, but it's quite true that my daughter introduced you, and we *were* rude. What do you want?"

She sounded to me like a godsend. If I could kidnap her and get her down to the office, and phone the rest of them that we had her and she was being very helpful, it was a good bet that they would all come on the run to yank her out of our clutches.

I gave her a friendly eye and a warm smile. "I'll tell you, Mrs. Savage. As your daughter told you, I work for Nero Wolfe. He thinks there are some aspects of this situation that haven't been sufficiently considered. To mention only one, there's the legal principle that a criminal may not profit by his crime. If it should be proven that Aubry killed your nephew, and that Mrs. Karnow was an accessory, what happens to her half of the estate? Does it go to you and your son and daughter, or what? That's the sort of thing Mr. Wolfe wants to discuss with you. If you'll come on down to his office with me, he's waiting there for you. He wants to know how you feel about it, and he wants your advice. It will only take us —"

A roar came from above: "What's going on, Mumsey?" Heavy feet were descending stairs behind Mrs. Savage, in a hurry.

She turned. "Oh, Dickie! I supposed you were asleep."

He was in a silk dressing gown that must have accounted for at least two C's of Cousin Sidney's dough. I could have choked him. He had been there all the time. After ignoring all my bell-ringing for the past two hours, here he was horning in just when I was getting a good start on a snatch.

"You remember Mr. Goodwin," his mother was telling him. "Down at that place this morning? He wants to take me to see Nero Wolfe. Mr. Wolfe wants to ask my advice about a very interesting point. I think I should go, I really do."

"I don't," Dick said bluntly.

"But, Dickie," she appealed, "I'm sure you agree that we should do all we can to get this awful business over and done with!"

"Sure, I do," he conceded. "But I don't see how it could help for you to go and discuss it with a private detective."

They looked at each other. The mutual resemblance was so remarkable that you might say they had the same face, allowing for the difference in age. Also, they were built alike. Her bulk was more bone and meat than fat, and so was his.

When she spoke I got a suspicion that I had misjudged her. Her tone was new, dry and cool and meaningful. "I think I ought to go," she said.

He appealed now. "Please, Mumsey. At least, we can talk it over. You can go later, after dinner." He turned to me. "Could she see Wolfe this evening?"

"She could," I admitted. "Now would be better."

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"I really am tired," she told me. Her tone was back to what might have been normal. "All this awful business. After dinner would be better. What is the address?"

I got my wallet, took out a card, and handed it to her. "By the way," I observed, "that reminds me. At that meeting last Friday at Mr. Beebe's office, Aubry put one of his cards on Beebe's desk and left it there. Do you happen to remember what became of it?"

Mrs. Savage said promptly, "I remember he took out a card, but I don't —"

"Hold it," Dick barked at her, gripping her arm so hard that she winced. "Go upstairs."

She tried to twist loose, found it wouldn't work, and leveled her eyes at him to stare him off. That didn't work, either. His eyes were as level as hers, and harder and meaner. Four seconds of it was enough for her. When he turned her around she didn't resist and, without a word, she walked to the stairs and started up. He faced me again.

"What's this about a card?"

"What I said. Aubry put one on Beebe's desk —"

"Who says he did?"

"Aubry."

"Yeah? A guy in for murder? Come again."

"Glad to. Beebe says so, too."

Dick snorted. He lifted a hand to tap my chest with a finger, but a short backward step took me out of range. "Listen, brother. If you and your boss think you can frame an out for Aubry don't let me stop you, but don't come trying to work my mother in, or me, either."

"I merely want to know —"

"The way out," he said rudely, and strode to the door and opened it. Since I stay where I'm not wanted only when there is a chance of gaining something, I took advantage of his courtesy and passed on through to the sidewalk.

I was getting low on prospects. Back at the Park Avenue address, where the hallman and I by now were on intimate terms, he informed me that Mrs. Horne had come in, and he had told her that Mr. Goodwin had called several times and would return. She had left word to send me up.

At Apartment D on the twelfth floor I was admitted by a maid, properly outfitted, who showed me to a living room where a slice of Karnow's money had been used with no great taste, but a keen eye to comfort. I sat down, and almost at once got up again when Ann Horne entered. She met me and offered a hand.

"We'll have to hurry," she said. "My husband may be home any minute. What do you do first, rubber hose?"

She was wearing a nice, simple yellow dress that either was silk or wanted to be, and had renovated her make-up since coming in from the street.

"Not here," I told her. "Get the stole. I'm taking you to a dungeon."

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She flowed onto a couch. "Sit down and describe it to me. Rats, I hope?"

"No, we can't get rats to stay. Bad air." I sat. "As a matter of fact, I've decided the physical approach wouldn't work with you, and we're going after you mentally. That's Mr. Wolfe's department, and he never leaves the house, so I've come to take you down there. You can leave word for your husband and he can join us."

"That doesn't appeal to me at all. Mentally, I'm a wreck. What's the matter — afraid I can't take it?"

"On the contrary, I'm afraid I can't give it. Nature went to a lot of trouble with you and I'd hate to spoil it. You'd enjoy a session with Nero Wolfe. He's afraid of women anyhow, and you'd scare him stiff."

She pulled a routine that I approved of. Knowing that if she took a cigarette I'd have to get up to light it, she first picked up a lighter and flicked it on, and then reached to a box for the cigarette. A darned good idea.

"What's the score?" she asked, after inhaling and letting it out.

I told her: "Paul Aubry is charged with murder. Mr. Wolfe can earn a big fee only by clearing him. Mr. Wolfe has never let a big fee get away. So Aubry will be cleared. We'll be glad to let you share the glory, though not the fee. Get the stole and let's go."

"You're irresistible," she said admiringly. "It's too bad about Paul."

"Not at all. When he gets out he can marry his wife."

"*If* he gets out. Do you remember nursery rhymes?"

"I wrote them."

"Then of course you remember this one:

" '*Needles and pins,*
*Needles and pins,*
*When a man murders*
*His trouble begins.*' "

"Sure, that's one of my favorites. Only, Aubry didn't murder."

She nodded. "That's your line, of course, and you're stuck with it." She reached to crush her cigarette in a tray, then suddenly turned to me with her eyes flashing. "All this poppycock! All this twaddle about life being sacred! For everybody there's just one life that's sacred, and everybody knows it! Mine!" She spread her hand on her breast. "Mine! And Sidney's was sacred to him, but he's dead. So it's too bad about Paul."

"If you feel that way about it you ought to be ready to give him a lift."

"I might be if I had anything to lift with."

"Maybe I can furnish something. Last Friday you were at a conference at Jim Beebe's office. Aubry put one of his business cards on Beebe's desk. Why did you pick up that card and what did you do with it?"

She stared at me a moment. Then she shook her head. "You'll have to get out the rubber hose, or pliers to pull out my nails. Even then I may hold out."

"Didn't you pick up the card?"

"I did not."

"Then who did?"

"I have no idea — if there was a card."

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"You don't remember Aubry putting it on the desk? Or seeing it there?"

"No. But this begins to sound like something. You sound as if you're really detecting. Are you?"

I nodded. "This is called the double sly squeeze. First I get you to deny you touched the card, which I have done. Then I display one of Aubry's cards in a cellophane envelope, tell you it has fingerprints on it which I suspect are yours, and dare you to let me take your prints so I can check. You're afraid to refuse —"

"Come and show me how you take my prints. I've never had it done."

I was, I admit it, curious. Was she inviting physical contact because she was like that, or was she expecting to voodoo me, or was she merely passing the time? To find out, I got up and went to her, took her offered hand and got it snugly in mine, palm up, and bent over it for a close-up. The hand seemed to be telling me that it didn't mind the operation at all, and with the fingertips of my other hand I spread her fingers apart, bending lower.

Of course, I was concentrated on the job. Whether the door from the outside hall to the foyer was opened so quietly that no sound came, or whether I heard but ignored it, I don't remember. But my investigation was interrupted by her sudden tight grip on my hand as she straightened up and cried, "Don't! You're hurting me! Norman — thank God!"

My whirl around was checked for a second by her hold on my hand. For her size and sex she had muscle. I suppose to Norman Horne, approaching from behind me, it could have looked as if I were holding her, instead of her me. But, even so, it must have been obvious that I was turning. He might have held his fire until I could at least see it coming. As it was, I was off balance when he plugged me on the side of the jaw, and I went clear down, sprawling. Added to the four touchdowns he had scored for Yale against Princeton, that made five.

"He was trying to force me —" Ann was saying, with her sense of humor.

Probably I would have scrambled to my feet and departed, since Wolfe wouldn't have appreciated my letting my personal feelings take charge when I was on a job, if it hadn't been for Horne's attitude. He was glaring down at me, with his fists ready, and it was doubtful if he'd wait till I got up on my knees. So I did a quick double roll, sprang all the way up, and faced him. He came at me wide open, as if I were a department-store dummy, and swung. There wasn't the slightest excuse for my missing the exact spot for a kidney punch, and I didn't. Air exploded out of him and he crumpled, not sprawling, but in a compact heap. Then he sort of settled.

His attractive wife took a couple of steps toward him, stopped to look at me, started to snarl something, and then just glared.

"I oughta spank you," I told her emphatically, turned, went to the

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foyer and got my hat, and let myself out. On the way down in the elevator, I felt my jaw and took a look at it in the mirror, and decided I would live.

I got home just at the dinner hour, 7:30. Since it takes an earthquake to postpone a meal in that house, and no mention of business is permitted at the table, my full report of the afternoon had to wait. If the main dish had been something like goulash or calves' brains, probably nothing unusual in my technique would have been apparent. But it was squab, which of course has to be gnawed off the bones. While I was working on the second one, Wolfe demanded:

"What the deuce is the matter with you?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're not eating, you're nibbling."

"Yeah. Broken jaw. With the compliments of Ann Horne."

He stared. "A *woman* broke your jaw?"

"Sorry, no shop talk at meals. I'll tell you later."

I did so, in the office after dinner, and after I had looked into a little matter I was wondering about. Before lunch I had phoned Saul Panzer, who was by far the best of the four men Wolfe calls in when we need help. Saul had said he would be at the office at 2:30. By that time I had left. When, on the way from the dining room to the office, I asked Wolfe if Saul had come, he replied in one word, "Yes," indicating that that was all I needed to know about it. Thinking it wouldn't hurt me to know a little more, I went and opened the safe and got out the little book from the cash drawer. Sometimes, in addition to the name and date and amount, Wolfe scribbles something about the purpose, but that time he hadn't. The latest entry was merely the date and "SP $1,000." I wondered what Saul had bought that might cost as much as a grand.

As I reported on my afternoon rounds, giving all conversations verbatim, which isn't so hard when you've had plenty of practice and know that nothing less will be acceptable, Wolfe leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed. He was entirely too placid. Ordinarily, when he sends out for bacon and I return empty-handed, he makes some pointed cracks, no matter how hopeless the errand might be. But he didn't say a thing. That meant he either didn't like the job, or that I was just a side show, including my sore jaw, and the main attraction was elsewhere. When I was through, he didn't open his eyes or ask a single question.

I groaned with pain. "Since it's obvious that I wasted five hours of your time, and may rile you if I say something, I guess I'll go see Doc Vollmer and have him set my jaw. He'll probably have to wire it."

"No."

"No what?"

He opened his eyes. "I'm expecting a phone call. Probably not until tomorrow, but it could come this evening. If it does, I'll need you."

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"Okay, I'll be upstairs."

I mounted the two flights to my room, turned on the lights, went to the bathroom mirror to see if there was enough swelling for a compress. I decided there wasn't, and settled myself in my easy chair with a collection of magazines.

Nearly two hours went by, and I was yawning, when a sound came faintly through the open door — the sound of Wolfe's voice. I went and lifted the phone on my bedside table and put it to my ear. It was dead. I had neglected to plug it in when I left the office. It would have been undignified to go to the hall, to the stair landing, and listen, so I did. Wolfe's voice came up at intervals, but I couldn't get the words. After enough of that I returned to the room and the easy chair, but had barely lowered myself into it when a bellow came from below: "Archie! *Archie!*"

I didn't descend the stairs three steps at a time, but I didn't mosey, either. Wolfe, at his desk, spoke as I entered the office:

"Get Mr. Cramer."

Getting Inspector Cramer of Homicide, day or night, may be very simple or it may be impossible. That time it was in between. He was at his office on Twentieth Street, but in conference and not available. So I had to bear down and make it plain that if he didn't speak with Nero Wolfe immediately, God only knew what tomorrow's papers would say. In a couple of minutes his familiar voice was growling at me:

"Goodwin? Is Wolfe on?"

I nodded at Wolfe and he took up his phone. "Mr. Cramer? I don't know if you know that I'm investigating the Karnow murder. For a client. Mrs. Karnow engaged me at noon today."

"Go ahead and investigate. What do you want?"

"I understand that Mr. Aubry is being held on a murder charge, without bail. That's regrettable, because he's innocent. If you are supporting that charge I advise you to reconsider. On the soundness of that advice, I stake my professional reputation."

I would have paid admission to see Cramer's face. He knew Wolfe would rather go without eating a whole day than be caught wrong in a flat statement like that.

"That's all I wanted, your advice." The growl was still a growl, but not the same. "Is it all right if I wait till morning to turn him loose?"

"Formalities may require it. May I ask a question? How many of the others — Mrs. Savage, her son, Mr. and Mrs. Horne, Mr. Beebe — have been eliminated by alibis?"

"Crossed off, no one. But Aubry not only has no alibi, he admits he was there."

"Yes, I know. However, it was one of the others. I must now choose between alternatives. Either I proceed independently to disclose and hand over the culprit, or I invite you to partake. Which would you prefer?"

It was nearly silence, but I thought

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I could hear Cramer breathe. "Are you saying you've got it?"

"I'm saying I am prepared to expose the murderer. It would be a little simpler if you can spare the time, for I must have them here at my office, and for you that will be no problem. If you care to take part, you could get them here in half an hour."

Cramer cussed. Since it's a misdemeanor to use profanity over the phone, and since I don't want to hang a misdemeanor rap on an inspector, I won't quote it. He added, "I'm coming up there. I'll be there in five minutes."

"You won't get in." Wolfe wasn't nasty, but he was firm. "If you come without those people, or without first assuring me that they will be brought, Mr. Goodwin won't even open the door to the crack the chain bolt will permit. He's in a touchy mood because a man hit him on the jaw and knocked him down. Nor am I in any humor to wrangle with you. I gave you your chance. Do you remember that when you were here this morning I told you that I had the last letter Mrs. Karnow received from her husband, and offered to show it to you?"

"Yes."

"And you said you weren't interested in a letter Karnow wrote nearly three years ago. You were wrong. I now offer again to show it to you before I send it to the District Attorney, but only on the condition as stated. Well?"

I'll say one thing for Cramer, he knew when he was out of choices, and he didn't try to prolong it. He cussed again and then got it out: "They'll be there, and so will I."

Wolfe hung up. I asked him, "What about our client? Hadn't she better be present?"

He made a face. "I suppose so. See if you can get her."

It was half-past 11 when I ushered Norman Horne and his attractive wife into the office and to the two vacant seats in the cluster of chairs facing Wolfe's desk. At their left was Mrs. Savage; behind them, Dick Savage, James M. Beebe, and Sergeant Purley Stebbins — only not in that order, because Purley was in the middle, behind Ann Horne. There had been another chair in the cluster, for Caroline Karnow, but she had moved it away, over to the side of the room where the bookshelves were, while I was in the hall admitting Mrs. Savage and Dick. That had put her where Purley couldn't see her without turning his head a full quarter-circle, and he didn't like it. But I let him know that it was none of his business where our client sat.

The red-leather chair was for Cramer, who was in the dining room with Wolfe. After the Hornes had greeted their relatives, including Caroline, and were seated, I crossed to the dining room and told Wolfe we were ready. He marched into the office to his desk, and stood.

"Archie. Introductions, please."

"Yes, sir." I was there. "Front row, from the left, Mr. Horne, Mrs. Horne,

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Mrs. Savage. Rear, from the left, Mr. Savage, Mr. Stebbins you know, and Mr. Beebe."

Wolfe nodded almost perceptibly, sat, and turned his head. "Mr. Cramer?"

Cramer, standing, was surveying them. "I can't say this is unofficial," he conceded, "since I asked you to come here, and I'm here. But anything Mr. Wolfe says to you is solely on his own responsibility. You're under no obligation to answer any questions he asks if you don't want to. I want that clearly understood."

"Even so," Beebe said, "isn't this rather irregular?

"If you mean unusual, yes. If you mean improper, I don't think so. You weren't ordered to come, you were asked, and you're here. Do you want to leave?"

Apparently they didn't, at least not enough to make an issue of it. They exchanged glances, and someone muttered something. Beebe said, "We certainly reserve the right to leave."

"Nobody will stop you," Cramer assured him, and sat. He looked at Wolfe. "Go ahead."

Wolfe adjusted himself in his chair to achieve the maximum of comfort, and then moved his eyes, left and right, to take them in. He spoke: "Mr. Cramer assured you that you are not obliged to answer my questions. I can relieve your minds of that concern. I doubt if I'll have a single question to put to any of you, though of course an occasion for one may arise. I merely want to describe the situation as it now stands and invite your comment. You may have none."

He interlaced his fingers at the crest of his central bulge. "The news that Mr. Karnow had been murdered was brought here by Mr. Stebbins early last evening. My interest in it was only casual until Mrs. Karnow came at noon today and aroused it by hiring me. Then I gave it my attention, and it seemed to me that your obvious motive for murder — Mrs. Savage and her son and daughter, and Mr. Horne as the daughter's husband — was not very compelling. From what my client told me of Mr. Karnow's character and temperament, it seemed unlikely that any of you would be driven to the dangerous and desperate act of murder. You have received your legacies legally and properly, in good faith, and surely you would at least have first tried an appeal to his reason and his grace. So one of you must have had another and stronger motive."

Wolfe cleared his throat. "That derogation of your obvious motives put me up a stump. There were two people with overpowering motives — Mr. Aubry and Mrs. Karnow. Not only did they stand to forfeit a much larger sum than any of you, but they also faced a deprivation even more intolerable. He would lose her, and she would lose him. It is not surprising that Mr. Cramer and his colleagues were dazzled by the glitter of that powerful motive. I might have

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been similarly bemused — but for two circumstances:

"The first was that I had concluded that neither Mrs. Karnow nor Mr. Aubry had committed murder. If they had, they had come fresh from that ferocious deed to engage me to negotiate with the man one of them had just killed. That could only be for the devious purpose of raising the presumption that they didn't know he was dead. I conversed with them for an hour without feeling any twinge of suspicion that they were diddling me. I was compelled either to reject that notion or abandon certain pretensions that feed my ego. The choice wasn't difficult."

"Also, Mrs. Karnow was your client," Cramer said pointedly.

Wolfe ignored it, which was just as well. He went on: "The second circumstance was the possibility of another motive. It was suggested in a letter which Mrs. Karnow showed me yesterday — the last letter she received from her husband, nearly three years ago." He opened a drawer and took out sheets of paper. "Here it is. I'll read only the pertinent excerpt:

" '*Speaking of death, if I don't come back, something I did before I left New York will give you quite a shock. I wish I could be around to see how you take it. You claim you have never worried about money, that it's not worth it. You've also told me that I always talk sardonic, but haven't got it in me to act sardonic. This will show you. I'll admit I have to die to get the last laugh, but that will be sardonic too. I wonder do I love you or hate you? These emotions are hard to tell apart. Remember me in thy dreams.*' "

He returned the papers to the drawer and closed it. "Mrs. Karnow had the notion that what her husband had done was to make a new will, leaving her out. But that theory was open to two objections. First, a wife cannot be so brusquely disinherited by a man of means. Secondly, such an act would have been merely malicious, not sardonic. But the phrase 'speaking of death' did imply some connection with his will, and raised a question. How might such a man have so remade his will as to cause such a woman to worry about money? That intention was clearly implied."

Wolfe turned a hand over. "Under the circumstances as I knew them, a plausible conjecture offered itself: that Karnow had made a new will leaving everything to his wife. That would certainly give her an inescapable worry about money, the same worry with which he had to contend — How much should his relatives be pampered? And since it was his money and they were his relatives, for her the worry would be even more bothersome than for him. I would call that sardonic. Also, he might have been moved by another consideration, a reluctance to bestow large amounts on them. I gathered, though Mrs. Karnow didn't make it explicit, that in matters of personal finance and economy Karnow did not regard his relatives as paragons — a judgment

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that has been verified by their management of their bequests."

Ann Horne's head jerked around and she told Caroline, "Thank you so much, Lina darling."

Caroline made no reply. Judging from her intent face and rigid posture, if she replied it would be an explosion.

"Therefore," Wolfe resumed, "it appeared that the hypothesis that Karnow had made a new will deserved a little exploration. To ask any of you about it would, of course, have been jackassery. It was reasonable to suppose that for such a chore he would have called upon his friend and attorney, Mr. Beebe, but it seemed impolitic to approach Mr. Beebe on the matter. I don't know whether any of you has ever heard the name, Saul Panzer?"

No reply. No shake of a head. They might all have been in a trance.

"I employ Mr. Panzer," Wolfe said, "on important missions for which Mr. Goodwin cannot be spared. He has extraordinary qualities and abilities. I told him that if Mr. Beebe had drafted a new will for Mr. Karnow, it had probably been typed by his secretary, and Mr. Panzer undertook to see Mr. Beebe's secretary and try to get on terms with her without arousing her suspicion. Early this afternoon he called on her in the guise of an investigator from the Federal Security Agency, wanting to clear up some confusion about her social security number."

"Impersonating an officer of the law," Beebe protested.

"Possibly," Wolfe conceded. "If such an investigator is an officer of the law, he is a federal officer, and Mr. Panzer can await his doom. In ten minutes he collected an arsenal of data. Mr. Beebe's secretary, whose name is Vera O'Brien, has been with him two and one-half years. Her predecessor, whose name was Helen Martin, left Mr. Beebe's employ in November, 1951, to marry a man named Arthur Rabson, and went to live with her husband in Florence, South Carolina, where he owns a garage. So, if Karnow made a new will before he left New York, and if Mr. Beebe drafted it, and if Mr. Beebe's secretary typed it, it was typed by the, now Mrs. Arthur Rabson."

"Three if's," Cramer muttered.

"Yes," Wolfe agreed, "but open for test. I was tempted to get Mrs. Rabson on the phone in South Carolina, but it was too risky, so Mr. Panzer took a plane to Columbia, and I phoned there and chartered a smaller one to take him on to Florence. An hour ago, or a little more, I got a phone call from him. He has talked with Mrs. Rabson, she has signed a statement, and she is willing to come to New York, if necessary. She says that Mr. Beebe dictated to her a new will for Mr. Karnow in the fall of 1951, that she typed it, and that she was one of the witnesses to Karnow's signature. The other witness was a woman named Nora Wayne, from a nearby office. She supposes that Miss Wayne did not know the contents of

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the will. By it Karnow left everything to his wife, and it contained a request that she use discretion in making provision for Karnow's relatives, who were named. Mrs. Rabson didn't know that —"

"Sidney wouldn't do that!" Aunt Margaret cried. "I don't believe it! Jim, are you going to just sit there?"

All eyes were on Beebe except Wolfe's. His were on the move. "I should explain," he said, "that meanwhile Mr. Goodwin was making himself useful. He learned, for instance, that the only item of tangible evidence against Mr. Aubry, a card of his that was found in Mr. Karnow's pocket, had been accessible to all of you last Friday in Mr. Beebe's office."

"How's that?" Cramer demanded.

"You'll get it," Wolfe assured him, "and you'll like it." He focused on Beebe: "The occasion has arisen, Mr. Beebe, for a question. As Mr. Cramer told you, you're not obliged to answer it. What happened to Mr. Karnow's last will?"

Thinking it over later, I decided that Beebe probably took his best bet. He being a lawyer, you might suppose that he would simply have clammed up. But knowing, as he did, that he was absolutely hooked on the will, he undoubtedly figured, in the short time he had for figuring, that the best way was to go ahead and take the little one, so as to dodge the big one.

He addressed Cramer: "I would like to speak to you privately, Inspector. You and Mr. Wolfe, if you want him present."

Cramer glanced at Wolfe.

Wolfe said, "No. You may refuse to answer, or you may answer here and now."

"Very well." Beebe straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin. At the angle I had on him I couldn't see his eyes behind the black-rimmed glasses. "This will ruin me professionally, and I bitterly regret the part I have played. It was a month or so before the notice came that Sidney had been killed in action that I told Ann about the new will he had made. That was my first mistake. I did it because I — of the way I felt about her. At that time I would have done just about anything she wanted. When word came that Sidney had been killed she came to my office and insisted on my showing her the will. I was even —"

"Watch it, Jim!" Ann, turned in her chair, called to him. "You dirty little liar. Ad-libbing it, you'll get all twisted —"

"Mrs. Horne!" Wolfe said sharply. "Would you rather hear him, or be taken from the room?"

She stayed turned to Beebe: "Go on, Jim, but watch it."

Beebe resumed, "I was then even more infatuated with her than before. I got the will from the safe and showed it to her, and she took it and stuffed it inside her dress. She insisted on taking it to show to her mother. It's easy to say I should have gone to any length to prevent that. It's easy now, but then I was incapable of opposing her. She took the will with

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her and I never saw it again. Two weeks later our engagement was publicly announced. I presented Sidney's former will for probate, and that was completely insane, since I only had Ann's word for it that the new will had been destroyed. Even though the girl who had typed the new will had married and gone away."

Beebe lifted a hand to adjust his glasses. "I won't say what it was that cured me of my infatuation for Ann Savage. It was — a personal thing, and it was enough to cure me good. I only wish to God it had happened sooner. Of course, I couldn't stop the probate of the will without ruining myself. In May, the estate was distributed, and later that month Ann married Norman Horne. That ended that business, I thought. I had learned my lesson, and it had really been a tough one."

He pulled his shoulders back. "Then, two years later, this jolt came: Sidney was alive and would soon be in New York. You can imagine how it hit me — or maybe you can't. I finally got it in focus enough to see that I had only two choices — either fall out of my office window, or tell Sidney exactly how it had happened. Meanwhile, I had to go through all the motions of talking it over with them, and listening to all their crazy suggestions. It wasn't until Monday, day before yesterday, that I decided, and I phoned Ann the next morning, yesterday, that I was going to see Sidney that evening and tell him the whole story. Then came the news that Sidney had been murdered. I don't know who killed him. All I know is what I'm telling you, and of course, for me, that's enough." He stopped for his mouth to do little spasms. He tagged it: "As a counselor-at-law I'm through."

I was a little disappointed with Norman Horne. Surely, he might have been expected to react manfully and promptly to such an indictment of his attractive wife, but he wasn't even looking at Beebe. He was looking at her, there beside him, and it was not a gaze of loyal and trusting faith. It was just as well that she didn't see it.

She didn't see it because her eyes were on Wolfe. "Is he through?"

"Apparently, madam, yes. At least, for the moment. Would you like to comment?"

"I don't want to make a speech. I don't think I need to. Just that he's a liar. Just lies."

Wolfe shook his head. "I doubt if that's adequate. It wasn't all lies, you well know. I strongly advise you either to keep silent, even though that would expose you to an adverse presumption, or to tell the truth without reservation. You warned Mr. Beebe of the hazard of an improvised complex lie. I urge you to heed your own warning. Now?"

She looked at Wolfe. "You're quite a performer, aren't you?"

"Yes," he said.

"I believe you already know the truth."

"If so, for you to try to withhold it

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would be pointless," he stated.

"Well, I'd hate to be pointless. You're right — some of what Jim said was true. He did tell me about the new will — but after the news came that Sidney had been killed in action, not before. He did take it from his safe and let me read it. It did leave everything to Caroline. He said that no one knew its contents except his former secretary, and she had married and gone to some little town in the South, so she was out of the way. He said there was no other copy of it, and that he was sure Caroline didn't know about it because she showed him Sidney's letter. He said he would destroy the will, and I, my mother, and my brother would inherit under the previous will — but only if I would marry him.

"I don't need to tell you how I really felt about marrying the money-grubbing little snake. I didn't tell him. I agreed to it. I suppose you don't care what I thought, but Sidney was dead, and I thought it was only fair for us to get a share. So I agreed, but I never had any intention of marrying Jim Beebe. He wanted an immediate wedding, before he presented the will for probate, but I talked him out of that, and our engagement was announced. When the will went through and the estate was distributed, I married Norman Horne. I didn't know whether Jim had destroyed the new will or not, but that didn't matter, because he wouldn't dare to produce it then." She fluttered a hand. "That's all."

"Not quite," Wolfe objected. "The sequel. Mr. Karnow's return."

"Oh, yes. Of course, Jim killed him. It's funny about Sidney's turning up alive. You may not believe it, but, in a way, I was glad of it, because I always liked him. I was sorry for Caroline and Paul, because I liked them, too. But I knew Sidney wouldn't try to get our share back from us. There was just one person who didn't dare to face him. Of course, Jim did face him when he went to his hotel room, but he wasn't facing him when he killed him — he shot him in the back of the head." She turned to Beebe: "Did you tell him about the will, Jim? I'll bet you didn't. I'll bet he never knew." She turned back to Wolfe: "Will that do for the truth?"

"It'll do for a malicious lie," Beebe squeaked.

Wolfe addressed the law: "I would prefer, Mr. Cramer, to turn the issue of veracity over to you. In my opinion, Mr. Beebe fumbled it and Mrs. Horne didn't."

At a later date, in a courtroom, a jury concurred. Justice is a fine thing, but that night in Wolfe's office it slipped up on one detail. After Cramer and Stebbins escorted Beebe out, and the others had gone, Caroline Karnow decided to return the kiss she had received in that room twelve hours earlier. I stood there waiting. But she went right past me, around to Wolfe behind his desk, put her arms around his neck, and gave it to him.

He growled, but I think he liked it.

"Wrong address," I said bitterly.

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# DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

## *and* Black Mask *section*

*Richard F. Barrett's "The Blonde Who Looked Like Trouble" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Tenth Annual Contest. It is a fast, breezy, easy-to-read story about a big lug named Jim O'Rourke who was going to police school and found to his embarrassment that the curriculum included a class in ballet dancing!*

*The readability of Mr. Barrett's yarn is undoubtedly the result of the author's long career as a newspaperman. He started early — at the age of 18 he enrolled in a journalism class in a California night school. The teacher — this was back in 1928 — was country editor of the "San José News," and he gave young Barrett a job covering a neighborhood area at 10 cents per column inch. Less than a year later, young Barrett was promoted, becoming a full-time reporter on the city side of the "News." He held down this desk for more than 8 years, then was appointed city editor; he held down this desk for 16 years, when he left to write a daily column — a job he is enjoying more than any other he has had in the newspaper field. And why not? Being a columnist has meant, among other joys, a trip to Hawaii with all expenses paid, and the prospect of more traveling to come.*

*Mr. Barrett's hobbies? As curious and interesting a set as you can imagine; ham radio, astronomy (life member of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific), collecting fossils, and trying to get acorns (from his in-laws' farm in Wisconsin) to sprout in California . . .*

*With the encouragement of Frank J. Taylor, who has had more than 100 articles published in the "Saturday Evening Post," and Hugh B. Cave, a popular fiction writer for national magazines, Mr. Barrett has been experimenting with nonfiction and fiction. He has already sold a half dozen articles, and now he comes through with his first short story.*

*About five years ago the Barretts built a modern ranch-style home, and between Mrs. Barrett's income as a "working girl" (she is nursing supervisor at the Santa Clara County Hospital) and Mr. Barrett's extra-curricular writing, they hope soon to lift the mortgage.*

*Good luck, Mr. B. You have a light touch — and humor in deft doses is always good medicine.*



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# THE BLONDE WHO LOOKED LIKE TROUBLE

*by RICHARD F. BARRETT*

AN IMPUDENT BIRD IN A SYCAMORE tree outside the gymnasium window gave Jim O'Rourke the razzberry and O'Rourke didn't blame it a bit.

This blonde girl usually made his head swim, but right at the moment it would be a pleasure to wring her neck. On such a beautiful Spring day they should be out having a picnic in the California sunshine.

Instead, here she was, putting him and half a dozen other big lugs through elementary ballet steps, for all the world like the earth's loveliest mahout trying to train a bunch of dancing circus elephants. No wonder the bird outside the open window made derisive sounds as O'Rourke and his fellow classmen stood with heels together, toes pointed out, bending their knees and straightening them in *demis* and *grandes pliés*, while the girl counted off the rhythm. Six feet tall and weighing a solid 190, O'Rourke could cut quite a swathe on the football field, but in a ballet class he looked slightly ludicrous.

"This I gotta do to become a cop," he thought bitterly.

The knee bending ended and the girl motioned him out of line. She wore a frown, and her lips, which looked like they should be put to better use, were pursed disapprovingly.

"O'Rourke, let me see you do a *grand battement*," she directed.

One of the guys snickered. O'Rourke set his feet solidly the way he had the day he booted the ball into coffin corner against Fresno State. Then he shifted his weight to his left foot and gave the air a vicious kick with his right.

"That wasn't a *battement* — that was a punt," the blonde said severely.

"It was good enough to win the Fresno game last Fall," Jim growled.

The girl looked at him coldly.

"This is not a football field, O'Rourke," she objected. "This is a ballet class and it is now required of all police students at Orchard City College, in case you have forgotten. It is intended to increase agility and muscular control. I need your cooperation."

"It's a lotta slush," O'Rourke snapped.

It was not the first time he had wondered why the dean came up with the idea of giving the police students ballet instruction when he, O'Rourke, was near the end of his college career. It was a new twist, one which was calculated to win the dean an "A" in academic circles for original thinking.

O'Rourke's father, who had been one of the best oldtime law enforcement officers in the business, would



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have punched the nose of anyone who asked him to do an *arabesque*. But police work was becoming a profession, and now you had to go to college and put up with the idiosyncrasies of the professors.

"Class dismissed," snapped the blonde. "I'd like to have a word with you, O'Rourke."

The rest of the group shuffled out of the gymnasium. The girl removed her flat-soled ballet slippers and stepped into a pair of high-heeled shoes. She picked up a light blue sweater from the radiator where she had left it, and pulled it over a white blouse that was nicely rounded in the right places. It was a blue which matched her eyes and blended with the dark blue shorts she was wearing. She had a neat, well-groomed look. Her name was Celia Wynn and O'Rourke estimated her age at 22. She had a dance studio somewhere in the neighborhood but came to the college gym on Tuesdays and Thursdays for the police students' ballet class that the dean had set up in one of his less lucid moments.

"You detest it, don't you?" she said.

"An understatement," O'Rourke nodded.

"So do I," said Celia. "Trying to teach ballet to a bunch of oafs with football muscles is rugged. But I need the money. Why do you put up with it?"

She turned her face up inquiringly and he became aware of the smoothness of her skin and the fullness of her lips. He was somewhat startled to be receiving sympathy from her.

"Necessity," he replied. "I want to be a cop like my old man, who was the greatest guy who ever lived. They made this class a requirement. So I'm stuck."

He shrugged miserably.

"Try to remember the difference between a *battement* and a punt," Celia suggested.

"Can't you dance in English?" he asked impatiently.

"French is the classical language of the ballet," she explained.

"Neither ballet dancing nor French will do a cop any good," said O'Rourke.

"Maybe, maybe not," she said. "Anyway, it disrupts the class to have a rebel in it. Why don't you be a good sport and try to string along with me?"

There was a pleading look in the blue eyes. The blonde hair was fragrant.

"I'll try," sighed O'Rourke.

"Thanks," said Celia. Her smile made him slightly dizzy. "You'll make a good officer some day. I'm tempted to tell you about the nasty man."

O'Rourke eyed her silently. Damned if he'd ask her what she meant. He had an uneasy feeling about her. She looked like trouble. He didn't want any more trouble after some he'd just had. He was already on thin ice and he wanted to keep his nose clean, get the Hell out of here with his B.A. in police science, and land a job. He

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shrugged and started for the door.

"All right, I'll tell you anyway," said Celia, following at his heels. "I think he's after Vicki Blaine."

"Who is?" O'Rourke asked in spite of himself.

"The nasty man," said Celia.

"And who's Vicki Blaine?"

"One of the youngsters in my small fry dancing class," said Celia. "Ever hear of Ben Blaine?"

"The Blaine Dried Fruit Company?"

"The same," said Celia. "He has money, even after taxes. That's why I walk the couple of blocks home with Vicki after her dancing class — that and the nasty man."

"Where does he come in?"

They had reached the door and he stood aside as she stepped out into the sunshine. The light shimmered on her blonde hair. The warning bell rang again inside O'Rourke. Steady, boy; it was Spring and her perfume had the fragrance of ginger blossoms.

"He drives by in his big pale blue convertible and stares at Vicki as if he were trying to memorize her," said Celia. "I think he'd kidnap her if I weren't along."

"You've been having nightmares — shouldn't eat mince pie before going to bed," O'Rourke advised.

Her face reddened.

"I thought there might be some way you could help me, but of course . . ." She left the sentence in mid-air, and started to walk away.

"I'll tell a policeman," O'Rourke called after her.

She spun and looked searchingly into his face.

"Better mind your own business," she said. "If the word gets around, all the parents will get afraid and it will be goodbye to my dancing school."

O'Rourke grinned derisively.

"I was only trying to be helpful," he said. "But mum's the word if you say so."

She turned away and O'Rourke watched the rhythmic motion of her smooth, shapely legs and the way the sun flickered on her hair through the leaves of the sycamores until she turned a corner. He sighed thoughtfully.

As he strode across the campus he met his room-mate, Bill Johnson.

"Great news, son," Bill told him. "The dean wants to see you."

O'Rourke felt a sudden attack of the butterflies.

"About that Sapelli business, no doubt," he said.

"No doubt," Bill replied cheerfully. "But don't look so condemned. He won't throw you out of school when he can get rid of you by graduation pretty soon anyway."

"Very persuasive," O'Rourke mumbled. "I'll use it on him."

He wished he had never seen nor heard of Sapelli. And you could include Slugger Shane, too. There had been rumors that until a current investigation was over, the Sapelli mob was moving from its metropolitan haunts into this peaceful agricultural county. Slugger had told him the gang had a hideout on a San Felipe Road

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ranch. O'Rourke had tipped the sheriff. But when a posse raided the place, it found nothing but an irate Italian farmer. The newspapers were still laughing about it, but they had not yet identified him as the tipster.

The dean was obviously in no jocular mood. He looked pink and slightly unhappy.

"Sit down," he rapped. "As you know, this police school has tried to maintain amicable relations with all law enforcement agencies. This we cannot do by sending them on wild goose chases and having them ridiculed in the newspapers."

"I understand that, sir." O'Rourke swallowed.

"Then can you tell me what in the name of Heaven you have been up to?"

"A year ago, when I was starting my practice work with the police department, I arrested Slugger Shane on Market Street for disturbing the peace," O'Rourke explained. "I used jujitsu on him. He was pretty surprised."

"You excel in matters which require only physical exertion," the dean said tartly. "Go on."

"Slugger became very friendly after that. So when he heard that the Sapelli gang was at the ranch he told me. All I did was pass the word along to the sheriff."

"He seems to have been an unreliable source," the dean said drily. "If the sheriff knew where you got your information he might have regarded it differently."

"It was told to me in confidence," said O'Rourke. "If there had been something to it and the mob learned who gave the tip-off, Slugger would have been rubbed out. I hope you won't tell anyone."

"You have no right to hope for anything," the dean snapped. "My advice to you, if you want to graduate, is to avoid trouble. In the meantime, this subject is so painful you have my assurance that I won't discuss it with you any further. Now get out of here."

He stood behind his desk and glared.

"Thank you," O'Rourke gulped.

The interview with the dean took place on Tuesday. It was on Thursday morning that the story broke in the newspapers. Seven-year-old Vicki Blaine, daughter of Ben Blaine, the dried-fruit packer, had disappeared with her dancing teacher, Celia Wynn. O'Rourke saw the story when he came down to breakfast. The newspaper in his hands trembled as he spotted the glamor photo of Celia and the picture of the little girl in a ballet skirt. The story didn't say so plainly, but you could get the impression that Celia had made off with the child for reasons unknown. There was no mention of the nasty man or the pale blue convertible. O'Rourke remembered that Celia hadn't reported her fears to the police lest she frighten the parents of her pupils.

O'Rourke realized that he should go to the authorities immediately

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with Celia Wynn's story, but he was in a bad position because of the Sapelli fiasco. They probably wouldn't believe him in the first place, and he didn't want to risk getting thrown out of school. The dean meant business. While he was trying to make up his mind what to do, the landlady called him to the telephone.

"Hey, Jimmy?" the voice at the other end inquired.

"Hello, Slugger," said O'Rourke.

"You want to find the Blaine kid?"

"Go away," snarled O'Rourke. "After what happened on your last tip I'm not buying any. They damn near kicked me out of school."

"All right, so the mob didn't happen to be at the ranch when the flatfeet got there," said the Slugger defensively. "Anyway, the mugs are there now and they have the dame and the kid with them."

"They wouldn't go there after the place had been raided," O'Rourke scoffed.

"It's wise guys like you and the way you think that make it the safest place in the world for them now," said the Slugger, sounding injured. "I'm just trying to do you a favor. Don't say I didn't tell you."

O'Rourke heard a click and placed the phone back in its cradle. He wished he knew whether or not Slugger was right this time. The thought of Celia in the hands of a gang of thugs hit him hard. Even if it meant more ballet lessons he had to find her and free her. He might hate being bossed in class by her, but there were other things about her he liked very much.

He wondered if the law was actually stupid enough to think that Celia would try to make off with Vicki herself. And he wondered if he would ever be able to live with himself if he ignored Slugger's tip and harm befell Celia and the kid. He groaned.

There was just a chance that Deputy Sheriff Jorge Pereira might listen to him. He had been inclined to shrug off the Sapelli business, and was not as unsympathetic toward "college cops" as the other oldtimers.

The deputy was having a day off, but O'Rourke found him at home in a small white cottage at the edge of town. He was short and wiry and, although O'Rourke guessed he was about fifty, there was no sign of a paunch. His black hair was shot with gray, but he was a man who could handle himself in a scuffle.

"Come in, come in," he commanded with a courteous gesture. He motioned O'Rourke to a chair and asked, "Glass of wine?" O'Rourke declined and the next question was, "What brings you here?"

"I'm in sort of a spot because of the Sapelli trouble," O'Rourke began.

Pereira shrugged.

"You thought you had something; it didn't pan out. Some people get so excited."

"The trouble is," said O'Rourke, regarding him gratefully, "that I'm afraid the sheriff won't believe anything I say from now on. I think I have a lead on the Blaine case."

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He felt as if the deputy were backing away from him, an obvious impossibility since Pereira was sitting.

"So-o-o?"

"So I thought I'd pass it along to you for whatever it's worth."

"It's from the same source as the other one, maybe?"

O'Rourke felt his ears burning.

"Partly so," he admitted. "But also a bit of information from one of the victims — the dancing teacher."

"She's a victim? Maybe she ran away with the girl herself."

"Why should she?" O'Rourke demanded angrily.

Pereira shrugged again.

"In the police business we learn that women do foolish things. Publicity for a dance studio, maybe?"

"Look," said O'Rourke, "I've no doubt that you've heard about the dancing class for police students at the college. . . ."

"A topic for humorous conversation around the jail on long winter nights," said Pereira.

"Well, she's the teacher," said O'Rourke. He repeated what Celia told him about the nasty man and the pale blue convertible, and about not wanting to frighten the parents.

"Maybe she was setting up a rescue story with teacher as the heroine," Pereira suggested.

"Not a chance," O'Rourke disagreed. "And this morning the guy who gave me the Sapelli tip told me that the mob has the girl and the kid on that San Felipe Road ranch."

Pereira studied the ceiling.

"Quite a yarn," he said. "But if I tell it to the boss he will want to know where I got it. Then it will be ha-ha for me."

O'Rourke knew when he was licked.

"In only thirteen years I come up for a pension," added Pereira.

"Sorry to have troubled you," O'Rourke said, rising from his chair.

"No trouble. Very interesting," Pereira said pleasantly, following him to the door. "Don't worry about the young lady. The best police brains, including the F.B.I., will be on the case."

"I hope they're good enough," O'Rourke snarled. Everybody had an angle, an excuse for not doing what should be done. "Thanks, anyway."

O'Rourke finished out his day's schedule at school — a sort of deadly routine that would have to be followed even if it were Judgment Day. But his mind wasn't in it. He was sure that Celia and the child were in the hands of as ugly a set of villains as you wouldn't want to meet anywhere. And the more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that since no one else would look into the Slugger's tip, he would have to do it himself, even if it jeopardized his four years of schooling. There was no other way out. He would have to go out to San Felipe Road after dark and snoop around. If he could be certain sure of his facts, then he could act. And a preliminary daylight reconnaissance would help.

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He drove east toward the Santa Ysabel range where the San Felipe Road wound up through the foothills between prune and apricot orchards.

Eight miles from the campus he came to the ranch that Slugger had told him about. There was an old white house set back among the prune trees about 100 yards from the road. At the rear was a barn with a driveway leading up to it, indicating it was now used as a garage. The orchard sloped up in back of the house.

He passed the ranch and drove on for a quarter of a mile until he found a place where he could leave the car under some trees. He parked for a half hour, then turned around and drove back to town.

As he rode along he decided it looked like too big a job for one man, so he decided to ask his room-mate to come along.

Bill was stretched out on the bed studying when O'Rourke entered and broached the subject. He listened attentively but declined firmly.

"It's enough for one of us to be nuts, my boy," he said. "And if you have any sense you will let the gendarmes handle this matter and keep your nose clean. Who knows? A couple of months from now prexy may hand you a pardon that lets you out of this place, maxima cum lousy."

"All right," O'Rourke said grimly. "If you won't help, keep your lip buttoned. If I'm not back in the morning, report it."

"I will accompany the coroner and identify your remains," Bill offered. "Got any moles or warts I don't know about!"

"Wise guy," O'Rourke snapped.

He ate his dinner without enjoyment, and as dusk fell he changed into dark clothing to give himself protective coloring against the night.

Again he turned his car toward San Felipe Road as darkness settled down and the stars began to appear. There was only a slim moon which would set early, but the stars and the sky glow from the city would provide all the light he could safely use in getting around the ranch.

He was scared. No use denying it. He would make no frontal assault on a gang of thugs. He was just after information, that was all.

As he drove past the ranch a light gleamed in a window. There was someone there for sure. As before, he proceeded a quarter mile farther and parked the car under the trees. He felt his pockets to make sure his penlight was handy. Then he scrambled up the bank above the road and started trudging back through the soft earth of the orchard. It had just been disked and the going would be rough if he had to make a run for it.

The air was still and silent except for the sounds of insects. He hoped the quiet wouldn't be disrupted by a watchdog.

He came to the top of the long slope that descended to where a light yellowed the drawn shade on a window in the farmhouse. The dark hulk of the barn loomed up at his left and he moved over to put it between him

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and the house. Then he made his stealthy approach down the hill. The prune trees ended about 25 feet behind the barn and he paused there, trying to sense what might lie ahead. Now he had to be careful about the dog, if there was one. Mustn't kick anything that might have been left lying around.

After taking stock he decided to investigate the barn first. He took a deep breath and let it out silently, then made his way across the open space, stepping carefully, and straining his eyes against the darkness. His heart was pounding in his ears by the time he put out his hands and felt the weathered wall of the barn next to his fingers.

He edged around to the front where the glow from a window fell across the driveway. He stepped back into the shadow, resisting the temptation to slap a mosquito that whined by his ear. He tried to pierce the gloom to see if there might be a sentry about who would find him a good target silhouetted against the barn door. He could detect nothing. It seemed like a good time to turn back, but he thought again of Celia — of the fragrance of her hair and the way her heels had tapped defiance to him a day or two ago. If she were in that house he had to find out.

He slipped around the corner of the barn and risked the betrayal of a squeaky hinge to open the barn door and get inside. Then he whipped out the penlight. Its rays fell on a sleek, pale blue convertible — *the* convertible, no doubt about it! He slid around it to have a look at the registration slip and was bending over the car door when a voice hissed at him from behind.

"Put 'em up — high!"

He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. The penlight fell from his hand.

"Come outside," the low voice ordered. "Get moving, and keep quiet."

With his arms raised he walked out of the barn and saw dimly the figure of a man. He sensed, rather than saw, the gun that was aimed at him.

"Turn around and face the wall," the voice said. O'Rourke complied and an expert hand frisked him.

"Now turn around and stick your hands out in front of you, wrists together," he was told. "And don't get funny."

He thought of swinging out blindly, but decided against it. Even a wild shot would bring others, and one adversary at a time was enough.

He felt cold metal snap around his wrists. Even in the dark there was no mistaking the handcuffs. He had a sudden feeling of hope.

"Hey, who are you?" he demanded under his breath.

"Pereira. Sheriff's office. Where's the rest of your mob?"

"Look. This is O'Rourke. Seems like we had the same idea. Take these bracelets off me."

A flashlight shone briefly in his face. He heard a chuckle.

"The college cop," said Pereira. "The dancing cop. Let's go behind

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# TRUE OR FALSE?

*by MICHAEL INNES*

"IT'S TRUE," INSPECTOR APPLEBY SAID, "that from one case and another I have kept a good many odds and ends. Most of them are quite colorless, and make no great show on the shelf. It's only the stories behind them that have a lurid tint."

"Nothing," I asked as I glanced at the little criminological museum, "at all spectacular in itself?"

"Only this." Appleby took down a plain silver casket, opened it, and tumbled its contents on a table. I blinked, for it was like looking at a little cascade of green fire. Indeed, I actually felt for a moment that he was going to burn himself when he put in a finger and stirred the little pile. "Did you ever hear of the Darcy emeralds?"

"The old Marchioness took very little interest in jewelry." Appleby had settled down to tell his story. "She was a strong-minded woman given to practical philanthropy, both on the family estates and in the world at large. But there were formal occasions, of course, upon which she had to appear *en grande tenue*, and then the famous Darcy emeralds would be brought out."

"They were an heirloom?" I was staring at the great green stones and wondering how they came to be in Appleby's charge.

"Oh, decidedly. They had been a gift from Charles II when he was something of a family friend. Their extreme value worried Lady Darcy, and she was for selling them and applying the proceeds to improving various agricultural properties. But the Marquis — whether veraciously or not — declared that he wasn't legally entitled to part with them. And at that Lady Darcy decided on a course that would make the things at least less of a nuisance to her than they had been. She commissioned the manufacture of replicas."

At this, light dawned on me. I pointed to the jewels on the table — and, as I did so, persuaded myself that they were rather less lustrous than I had at first imagined. "In fact, my dear Appleby, these are worthless?"

Appleby smiled. "If you have sufficiently grand ideas you may call them that. Actually, they are worth several hundred pounds. Very high-class reproductions of this sort are not inexpensive. But Lady Darcy felt that her action was going to bring her peace of mind that would be cheap at the price. She had read a lot about bur-



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*Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key at bottom gives sources.*

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|---|---|---|
| **THE BUTCHER'S WIFE**<br>*by OWEN CAMERON*<br>(SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50) | ". . . unusually sensitive and intelligent novel . . ." (AB) | "Pleasantly written; authentic folks; end not unguessable. Qualifies." (SC) |
| **GOLD WAS OUR GRAVE**<br>*by HENRY WADE*<br>(MACMILLAN, $2.75) | "Highly authentic as to its excitement from method." (FC) | "Full treatment here for those who like detailed coverage." (SC) |
| **THE LAST STRAW**<br>*by DORIS MILES DISNEY*<br>(CRIME CLUB, $2.75) | ". . . taut, realistic . . . fast-paced writing and eloquent detail . . ." (H-M) | "No rough stuff, good character drawing, considerable impact." (AdV) |
| **CONJUROR'S COFFIN**<br>*by GUY CULLINGFORD*<br>(LIPPINCOTT, $2.50) | ". . . wholly unconventional and delightful detective story . . ." (AB) | ". . . humor, agreeable diversions, and . . . lively pace. You won't want to miss it." (DBH) |
| **IMPACT OF EVIDENCE**<br>*by CAROL CARNAC*<br>(CRIME CLUB, $2.75) | "Fine atmosphere . . . story strange and engrossing, perfectly credible . . ." (AdV) | "Setting, personnel deftly, truly drawn; humor high, action fast." (SC) |
| **TO FIND A KILLER**<br>*by LIONEL WHITE*<br>(DUTTON, $2.75) | ". . . almost one to make Bill McGivern look to his laurels . . ." (H-M) | ". . . denouement, supposedly ironic, has all the subtlety of a brickbat." (LGO) |
| **CUT ME IN**<br>*by HUNT COLLINS*<br>(ABELARD-SCHUMAN, $2.50) | ". . . a great deal livelier and more amusing than most of its school . . ." (AB) | "Nudity-cum-crudity yarn is gory and superchatty. Punch-drunk." (SC) |

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*
DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*
LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*
AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*



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# *EQMM's* DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

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| **INSPECTOR MAIGRET AND THE KILLERS**<br>*by GEORGES SIMENON*<br>(CRIME CLUB, $2.75) | ". . . pace is fast and technique sure. Age cannot wither, etc." (SC) | ". . . has more violence and action than other Maigret novels." (LGO) |
| **THE LIMPING GOOSE**<br>*by FRANK GRUBER*<br>(RINEHART, $2.75) | ". . . for those who want a good time." (CC) | ". . . disarming and funny as ever . . . rather far-fetched, but do you care?" (LGO) |
| **FATAL IN MY FASHION**<br>*by PAT McGERR*<br>(CRIME CLUB, $2.75) | ". . . probably the best of Miss McGerr's novels to date . . ." (AB) | "Well-written, convincing and absorbing. Recommended." (AdV) |
| **GIVE A MAN A GUN**<br>*by JOHN CREASEY*<br>(HARPER, $2.75) | ". . . fast paced without the action becoming tiresome. Highly recommended to the discerning . . ." (FC) | ". . . extravaganza . . . can this be staid old London? You'll keep reading, though." (AdV) |
| **HELL STREET**<br>*by MAX FRANKLIN*<br>(RINEHART, $2.75) | ". . . writing of this lively theme is earnest, drab and heavy-handed." (AB) | ". . . some good plot twists . . . genuine-sounding background." (LGO) |
| **THE CHARKA MEMORIAL**<br>*by WALLACE WARE*<br>(CRIME CLUB, $2.75) | ". . . dull and foolish book, rich in improbable premises, inept espionage . . ." (AB) | ". . . high tension, thoughtful and frightening story of today's political, ideological arena." (DBH) |
| **CRY MURDER**<br>*by NANCY RUTLEDGE*<br>(DUTTON, $2.75) | ". . . engrossing adult story, peopled by credible characters . . ." (DBH) | "Formula slick-paper job uses rills-of-consciousness technique." (SC) |

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

CC: *Curtis Casewit in the Denver Post*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*



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The deputy turned quickly to Celia.

"How long since the others left here?"

"About an hour and a half," said Celia.

"Too early for them to be getting back."

Pereira bounded over to the window, pulled the shade back a trifle, and looked out.

"It's okay," he said. "It's the boys from the office. I told them if they didn't hear from me by 9 o'clock to get here on the run."

He took the automatic from his pocket and handed it to O'Rourke. He smiled triumphantly.

"I'll have them put the car out of sight and we will have a little reception committee ready for the others when they return. If our friend here starts to revive, you know what to do until the boys and I get back."

The deputy disappeared out the door. O'Rourke was struck by a new and horrible thought.

"If they brought reporters along with them I'm ruined," he groaned. "This will get into the paper and I'll be kicked out of school for getting involved in this mess."

Celia, who had one comforting arm around Vicki Blaine, waved her free hand.

"There won't be any reporters along after what the papers said about the raid on this place a few days ago," she reassured. Then she was struck by another thought. "Anyway, if that was a *battement*, the dean, the ballet class, and I are all vindicated," she said. "The dean should be very happy."

There were footsteps on the porch, then Pereira and another deputy entered. The gunman on the floor started to stir. O'Rourke rose and helped Celia to her feet.

"We'd better get these people back to town before there's any more shooting," said Pereira.

O'Rourke put his hands on Celia's shoulders. He felt at peace with the world. She was right, of course, about the dean and the ballet. He would finish school. He would be a good officer. He put his lips close to her ear.

"It was a dilly of a *battement*, wasn't it?" he whispered.

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**Note:**

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"We'll see when the boss gets back," said the mobster. "Personally, I'm in favor of bumping the lot of you. Especially that cop." He looked at Pereira. "I ran across your badge while I was frisking you. I would not like to have you put the finger on me in a line-up later on."

His voice was flat and businesslike. It gave O'Rourke a chill, and then infuriated him.

"If it wasn't for these handcuffs, you dirty rat —" he began.

The gunman's eyes became beady and his olive skin paled slightly. He stepped forward with his gun aimed at O'Rourke's abdomen. He stopped three feet in front of him and said, "What would you do, punk?"

O'Rourke saw the anger in his face. He sensed Jorge Pereira tensing beside him. He glanced swiftly at Celia and the child and saw them rigid with terror. Celia was bracing herself against the sound of the gun.

The snout of the automatic started to rise.

Celia shrieked.

"*Battement, battement! Battement*, O'Rourke!"

The gunman, startled and puzzled, threw a quick glance over his shoulder.

In that split second O'Rourke's right foot soared through the air. His toe thudded deliciously into the gunman's right wrist. There was a sharp crack and a stab of fire. O'Rourke pitched back, unable to balance himself with his manacled hands. The gun flew through the air. Jorge Pereira leaped like an uncoiled spring.

The thug cursed and jumped after him. Pereira had the gun in his hand, but before he could swing it up the mobster was on him and clutching at the deputy's wrist. They rolled over on the floor as O'Rourke scrambled to his feet and got behind the gunman, who was on top. O'Rourke held his hands high over his head and brought the handcuffs crashing down on the back of the thug's skull. The steel tore at his wrists and sent a sharp stab of pain up his arms, but the gunman slid silently to the floor.

Jorge Pereira, puffing with exertion, slipped the automatic into his pocket, then reached into his other pocket for the key and slipped the handcuffs off O'Rourke's wrists. While O'Rourke massaged the spots where the steel had torn into them, Pereira put the cuffs on the unconscious man.

"Would one of you gentlemen mind untying me?" Celia inquired.

Pereira loosened the cord around her ankles. O'Rourke, bending over her, found his fingers fumbling with the handkerchiefs that held her arms. Even in the dim light of the room her blonde head was beautiful, and she was still fragrant. He had a hard time concentrating on the knots. Her head was close to his.

"It was a beautiful *battement*, Jim," she said dreamily.

"It was a punt," he said stonily, "and it won the game again."

Suddenly they heard an automobile coming into the driveway.

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the barn where I can use this light long enough to get the key in the lock."

At that moment a new voice came out of the darkness, cold and level and loud.

"Drop that gun!"

The deputy's gun thudded on the gravel driveway.

As he and Pereira were caught in a circle of light, O'Rourke knew that this time he was not in friendly hands. The menace he had felt in the darkness around him had really come to life. He thought wryly that he was about to be vindicated on his previous tip to the sheriff, which came under the heading of cold comfort.

Again he was frisked for weapons. The light fell on the manacles on his wrists. The man grunted.

"I don't understand this," he said, "but it's going to save me some trouble. We'd better go in and have a little talk."

He directed the flashlight ahead of them with a curt order, "Move!"

Pereira led the way, O'Rourke behind him, and their captor in the rear. Their steps crunched in the gravel, then sounded hollowly on the wooden stairs leading up to the porch.

Pereira paused at the door. The gunman stepped forward and unlocked it and waved them in with his automatic. As the light fell across him, O'Rourke saw that he was of medium height, swarthy, thick-lipped, and baggy-eyed. He wore a dark suit and a striped shirt, the collar of which was drawn together with a clasp beneath his necktie. He was middle-aged and obese.

As the door latch clicked behind them a feminine voice cried, "O'Rourke!"

O'Rourke blinked his eyes against the light and saw that it was Celia Wynn — not that it was necessary for his eyes to tell him. The way something inside him did back flips at the sound of her voice had identified her.

She was seated in a straight-backed chair with her wrists tied to the arms of it by handkerchiefs. Her feet were bound together in front of her with a piece of sash cord, and beside her crouched a little girl in sweater, shorts, and ballet slippers. She was white-faced and there was terror in her eyes.

O'Rourke stepped toward Celia, and the gun was immediately trained at his middle.

"Don't get careless," growled the thug.

"If this isn't your nasty man he'll do until a nastier one comes along," O'Rourke said to Celia.

The gunman glanced at Celia and asked, "Who is this punk?"

"Friend of mine," said Celia. Then, addressing O'Rourke, "The nasty man and the third one have gone to San Francisco to mail a ransom note."

"You talk too much," said the mug. He waved the gun at Jorge Pereira. "You stand over there against the wall." Then he herded O'Rourke against the wall, too.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Celia.

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glars and bandits and masked men presenting themselves with revolvers at the bedside of titled ladies. And, although perfectly courageous, she wanted no nonsense of that sort. So she ordered her set of replicas.

"Lord Darcy quite approved. There might be one or two particularly august occasions in the course of the year, he said, at which it would be proper that the real things should still be worn. But, apart from that, they could remain securely in the bank, and Lady Darcy could go to the opera and whatnot in the imitations."

"The plan worked very well. Nobody was told — Lord Darcy didn't care for the idea of its being generally known that his wife went about in paste — and the world might never have been any the wiser but for the burglary."

I was astonished. "Lady Darcy's apprehensions were really fulfilled?"

"Yes, indeed. A cat burglar carried off the Marchioness's jewelry. She was as pleased as Punch. I went along to see her myself, and she told me of her stratagem with great *éclat*. So I took my leave and went straight to the bank."

"The bank, my dear Appleby?" I was nonplussed.

"And I took with me our expert in that sort of thing. It was, you know, an obvious piece of routine. I showed Lady Darcy's authorization, and the real emeralds were produced. Or rather, that was the idea. Our expert spent thirty seconds on them and declared positively that they weren't the real thing at all. What the bank had been holding were simply high-quality replicas."

"Surely, Appleby, your discovery was a delicate one?"

"It was, indeed. Nothing, I assure you, makes a policeman more cautious than talk of missing heirlooms in a great family. Shocking scandals may always be just round the corner. Still, I hoped for the best — and you can guess what that was."

"Some act of simple carelessness?"

"Just that. Remember that Lady Darcy, although so proud of her security scheme, didn't really care about the jewels. The formal and ceremonial — not to say the ostentatious — aspect of her social position didn't mean much to her. It seemed quite feasible that she had simply muddled up the true emeralds and the replicas on some occasion when she had had both beside her. Which was, of course, uncommonly lucky for that cat burglar.

"But somehow I hadn't much confidence in this. Lady Darcy didn't strike me as a muddle-headed woman. I felt she could have run anything from a jumble sale to a battleship with the same sharp, aristocratic efficiency. And I guessed that her security arrangements would be pretty sound throughout.

"The fellow at the bank made no bones about telling me as much as he knew of the affair at his end. Three times since the emeralds were deposited Lady Darcy had called in person to collect them. And on each occasion

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they had been found, securely locked in their own case, in the bank night-safe on the following morning.

"Lady Darcy's own account agreed with this entirely. On each occasion the jewels had been taken out to wear at Court. And on each occasion she had collected them herself, and taken them out of their case only when she was actually ready to put them on. Later she had taken the case down to her car with her, replaced the emeralds in it while driving home — which was done by way of a detour to the bank. And then Lord Darcy himself had each time nipped out and put them in the night deposit safe. Well, that was that. I began to have my doubts about the lucky burglar."

"Doubts, Appleby?" I was much startled. "You mean you doubted his existence?"

"Not at all. He had certainly existed. I simply doubted whether emeralds, true or false, had been any part of his haul. And I asked Lady Darcy a crucial question. When had she last seen the replicas — or what she had taken to be the replicas? Had she looked at them since her last outing in the real thing? And her answer was that she had not. She hadn't had them out of *their* case since a week or so before that — nor subsequently, either.

"At this point I didn't fail to remember an embarrassing fact. Old Lord Darcy was famous for his eccentric conduct, and there had been some really notorious incidents in his past career. Had he quietly pocketed the emeralds that night, returning the replicas to the bank in order to gain a little time before there were any awkward questions? I spent a sleepless night considering this possibility." Appleby smiled. "Which was foolish. Because we caught the burglar next day — with the spoils still in his possession."

"Including the real emeralds?"

"Not at all. Including *another set of replicas!*"

"*This* set." And Appleby began returning the green stones to their case. "Lady Darcy's cleverness had been her undoing — and right at the start of her operation. The theft had taken place on the premises of the firm making the reproductions, and what had been returned to her were *two* sets of replicas. She wasn't, as I've said, really interested in jewelry, and she never tumbled to the fraud. When, but for that burglar, it would eventually have been detected, one really can't say.

"Did we get back the real emeralds in the end? Oh, dear me, yes. That's why the noble lady gave me these." And Appleby tapped the silver box lightly before returning it to its shelf.

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## WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

*Until a full year before she wrote her prize-winning story about "Aunt" Emmy and her charming "nephew," Veronica Parker Johns felt that she knew very little of the problems of old people — no more than she had picked up from casual reading in newspapers and magazines. Then she became interested, and in that year she learned enough to find herself called, in the footnote to a recently published article, a "volunteer sociologist." Now, what had caused this new interest? The most realistic thing imaginable — a human-interest situation in her own family. She came to know and understand her mother's ancient Cousin Elsie. Up to that time Miss Johns had not paid much attention to Cousin Elsie, but suddenly the old lady became Miss Johns's responsibility. To communicate with her, Miss Johns found out that she had to explore that nebulous world in which Cousin Elsie, in her dotage, spent so much of her time — that other-world in real life in which absent-mindedness is more than a mere idiosyncrasy, in which fact and fancy become interchangeable, in which the wandering of an old lady's mind occurs so often that there are periods when the gentle old soul doesn't even remember her own name . . . . And Miss Johns, a sensitive and creative writer, discovered a new and fascinating field of inquiry.*

*The world of the elderly, Miss Johns warns, is not a wholly peaceful kingdom. There are many dangers, and some are definitely wolves in sheep's clothing; but there are also many pleasures for the old — pleasures beyond the ken of the young, who are usually too occupied with the problems of youth to realize that old age has problems peculiarly its own. In any event, Cousin Elsie proved an able though unwitting guide in this new land, and like most travelers, Miss Johns simply could not resist reporting her journey and sharing her experience . . .*

# THE GENTLEMAN CALLER

*by VERONICA PARKER JOHNS*

MISS EMMY RICE, WHO DIDN'T look a day over 75, lifted a lid to sniff the fragrance of bubbling beef stew. Beef it really was this time — not scraps conned from a kindly butcher but nuggets of succulent beef bought with twice-counted pennies. The young man, the light of her fast-



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dimming life, was coming to dinner.

Lowering the gas, she glanced at the turnip watch which had belonged to her father and now hung on the hook of an abandoned birdcage. It was a quarter to 6. The guest, Gerald, would appear in fifteen minutes if he continued to indulge his admirable habit of punctuality, which seemed an anachronism in this impolite world. Nightly, for weeks, he had joined her at precisely 8 o'clock on the park bench facing the river, since that first evening when the unlikely had happened; then, observing his unease, his need, Miss Emmy had defied convention and struck up a conversation with a member of the opposite sex.

Combing her wispy hair, fluffing it deceptively into a net, she recalled the details of that encounter. It was strange how she could remember almost everything that related to Gerald although frequently she forgot her own name and address and had to consult the paper pinned inside her handbag for that data. Once, in one of those sudden flashes of lucidity which in the pattern of her vagueness were now the exception, not the rule, she had heard her landlady remark of her that she had lost contact with reality. Indeed, it was quite the contrary. Reality had lost contact with her. Until that night on the bench — how long ago was it, as though time mattered?

She digressed from the sweet recollection of her meeting with Gerald to think spitefully of her landlady. A lot *she* knew, nagging Emmy constantly to part with some of the magazines which crowded the nine by twelve bed- dining- living-room. "Dust catchers," Mrs. Martin complained, jabbing at a tottering pile of them with an angry carpet sweeper, "full of outdated news which could be news to nobody." Emmy had primly replied that they were pretty and that was enough for her.

"Pretty!" Mrs. Martin snorted antagonistically. "I'd like to know what's pretty about *Time* magazine for February five of 'Forty-eight."

Miss Emmy had not demeaned herself to retort. She chuckled now, content that she had not yielded to pressure, in which event she might have missed the '53 issue of *Life* with the picture that looked like Gerald.

It wasn't really Gerald, of course. Gerald's hair was red whereas the man in the photograph was obviously a towhead. Gerald sported a mustache as dashingly as ever was done in the 'Nineties; she was sure it did not conceal a mouth as weak as this other's. Still, there was something about the eyes and the corners of them, the deep cleft chin and the jawline, which had made her tear out the picture and squirrel it away in a bureau drawer.

Spiritually there was no comparison between Gerald and the young man who had achieved national notoriety, who was a thief and an escaped convict. Some time, just for a joke, she would show Gerald the clipping and they would have a good laugh over it, but not tonight. Tonight she wanted everything to be just perfect.

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There had been a girl with him that first evening, a flashy, cheap-looking hussy not worth the apologies he was lavishing upon her. The girl had grumbled about something, her shrill voice fairly drowning out Gerald's placatory murmurings, while Miss Emmy stood tentatively behind the bench which years of occupancy had led her to think of as her own. Before she had decided to assert squatters' rights, the baggage had flounced off, happily never to reappear in that vicinity.

Miss Emmy, then, had spoken to the distraught young man, making a diversionary remark about the number of cars there were on the streets nowadays, had he noticed, and wasn't it a caution? It was an observation she often made, always with an air of well-bred surprise and moderate disapproval because she always *was* surprised to notice that the horseless carriage had entirely taken over.

"I shudder to think," she murmured, illustrating her reaction with a Delsarte gesture, "what became of all the horses. They seem to have vanished from the face of the earth."

"Lady," he said, not turning toward her, "it should happen to the nags I bet on."

Young people talked differently nowadays, she knew, and this was the only thing Gerald had ever said to her which might be considered coarse or common. After that he turned and looked at her, long and silently. He stared at the pink straw hat which obligingly lent itself to an endless routine of retrimming, at the mined-diamond pinky ring, the paired gold bangles, the pince-nez on a thin gold pulley pinned to her crepe dress.

Gerald's blue eyes were set a little too close together for him to be as handsome as she pretended. Their gaze had grown so intense that for a second or two she regretted the impulse which had led her to speak to him. Then, in some recess of his ordered mind, Gerald pushed a button marked *Charm*. A smile flooded his face.

"I bet you've driven many a spanking pair in your day, ma'am," he said.

"When I was little," she told him, "I used to have a pony."

She told him lots more, then and later to which he listened with rapt attention. He was such an audience as she had believed no longer existed. People, it seemed, did not have the time or simply weren't interested in the things she found absorbing. Gerald's attitude was refreshingly different.

Which was why she had invited him to dinner tonight. No other man had been permitted to enter her tiny home. Mrs. Martin had had fits trying to find a lady electrician when the ceiling light blew out, and there was a cracked pane in the window because of the shortage of female glaziers. Gerald would be the first man ever to put foot in Emmy's room.

It was precisely 6 when the downstairs bell of the converted brownstone rang sharply. Emmy went to the top of the top flight of steps to welcome her gentleman caller.

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Gerald had brought a bottle of port and three sweetheart roses. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she filled a vase from the bathroom which she shared with four other roomers. Meticulously she rinsed dusty wineglasses, her hands trembling with the long-forgotten ecstasy of receiving a gift of posies.

She hurried, an onset of panic nearly convincing her that she had invented the whole thing, that there was no Gerald, that these receptacles were being prepared for wine and flowers that were dust and ashes. Her imagination had played similarly plausible pranks on her only recently.

She had found things in her room the presence of which she could not possibly explain. On the other hand she kept losing things, or thought she kept losing things she had never owned. There had been that frightful row with the woman in the room adjoining hers about a saucepan. Mrs. Martin had meddled in that affair, proving to her own if not Miss Emmy's satisfaction that the pan belonged to the neighbor. There was definitely a new dimension in Miss Emmy's life in which fact and fancy were interchangeable.

It was an area, she was aware, in which she must tread gently, for Mrs. Martin was always ready to pounce upon her. Mrs. Martin had indicated that she could very well do without a tenant who was so unclear about what was and wasn't. One false step, Emmy knew, would send her hurtling into that "Institution" in which, the landlady often stated behind a not too carefully cupped hand, she ought to be.

Back in her room she was pleased to discover that Gerald abided in the factual world. He was whistling a waltz as he uncorked the port. She set down the wet glasses and started looking for the dish towel. By the time she had found it, wrapped in crumpled newspaper in a compartment of the desk, he had already done the honors with a clean handkerchief.

"Thank you," she said humbly. "I don't know what gets into me. It seems almost as if I take great pains to hide things even from myself."

She meant objects like the towel, and the nightgown for which she had to hunt an average of fifteen minutes every night, but under the stimulus of Gerald's sympathy she broadened the field to include all those secret things about herself that currently worried her.

"I'm not as sharp as I used to be," she asserted boldly, glad at last to have said it aloud.

"You're bright as a dollar," Gerald protested, "and a grand cook, by the smell of that stew." With a gallant bow he handed her one of the filled wineglasses, saying, "Do you know what it means to me, a home-cooked meal?"

"I hope you enjoy it."

She sipped the port, saying it tasted strong, did he suppose she should? "I'm not used to it now, although they did say I had quite a head when I was a girl. Did I tell you about that young man wining and

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dining me at the Hotel Brevoort?"

"No," Gerald lied. This would make seven times he had heard it.

She had just reached the part about the champagne in the slipper, an apocryphal bit which by now she found wholly convincing, when her eyelids began to droop.

"You must forgive an old lady," she said breathlessly. "Just a cat nap. I take them often. Ten minutes or so and I'm fit as a fiddle."

In an instant she was asleep, bolt upright. Gerald reached for the bottle and poured himself two in quick succession. It wasn't exactly his kind of liquor, but it was better than nothing. He was hungry and the stew *did* smell good, but that could wait. Waiting was a thing he did well because he had had plenty of practice.

Nevertheless, after a quarter of an hour he grew restless. The straight-backed chair on which he sat was uncomfortable. The room was small, like a cell, and seemed to be growing smaller. He got up and twiddled the knob of the early model radio. Sound filled the small room but the old lady slept on. He tuned in a rhumba full blast and walked over to her, mockingly pantomiming an invitation to dance. But she did not stir. Maybe she's dead already, he thought, shrugging; just my luck.

She was not. A few minutes later, she awoke with a start.

"My goodness!" she exclaimed, stumbling over to the stove. "Phew! Why didn't you turn it off. Didn't you smell it?"

"Smell what?"

"Scorching. I smelled it so hard it woke me up. Always did have a keen sense of smell. My eyesight's failing and my hearing's gone off badly, but," she tapped her high-bridged nose, "my smeller's still A number one. When I was a girl Papa used to say he'd hire me out as one of the bloodhounds in an Uncle Tom troupe. Joking, of course."

Papa would have been beside himself to hear the reception given his sally by Gerald. Gerald laughed until he sounded as if he were having hysterics and momentarily she expected hammering on the common wall of her neighbor's room.

She managed to salvage enough of the stew, which was delicious. After dinner they went out and sat on their bench for a while and watched the boats go up and down the river.

He didn't mention the will until the third visit.

She'd served meat loaf that night, counter scraps eked out with bread crumbs. She knew she was overspending, but she didn't give it too much thought. Chiefly what she thought was that few people get a chance to live more than once — that very few elderly ladies, their friends gone on before them, ever found a whole new life on a riverside bench.

He called her "Aunty" by now; he had appointed himself her favorite nephew. "I want to talk to you about something," he announced after the dinner dishes had been washed and

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put away. "It's rather a touchy subject. I don't want to hurt your feelings."

"You're not going away?" she asked, panicky, that being the worst thing she could think of.

"No," he said soberly. "It's not me. It's you. You'll be going away some day, maybe sooner than we think."

"Me?" She chuckled. "I never go anywhere."

"I'm referring," there was tremolo in his voice, "to that last, long journey."

His mien was so funereal that she could not miss the point. Comfortingly she told him that she would be ready when the call came to join her family and friends Beyond.

"That's not what I'm getting at," he said. "Look, I guess the best way to say this is just to say it right out. I've been reading a book about wills. Have you made one?"

"No, I haven't. I didn't think I had enough to bother."

"You have plenty of nice things," he contradicted, fingering a chipped Meissen shepherdess. "You have your treasures. You want to make sure, don't you, the right people get them afterwards?"

She saw the wisdom of this. She supposed that if she left no specific instructions Mrs. Martin would simply come in and pirate everything.

Gerald hung the smile on his face. "Don't go thinking your favorite nephew is only fixing it so he will inherit your fortune," he teased.

"Fortune?" she echoed, bewildered.

"I'm sure I've got no fortune. Papa lost almost everything and Mama's last illness ate up the rest."

"Don't kid me." There was dust from the shepherdess on the finger with which he stroked her cheek. "Until I came into your life you were what the newspapers call a 'recluse.' Recluses always have millions in banknotes stashed away between the pages of old magazines. It's expected."

"Not me," she insisted. "All I have is a few little shares of Consolidated Gas and American Telephone. They're very nice to me, the companies. They send me money every now and again. It's what I live on."

"Sometimes," she added shyly, "they send me an envelope and I think it's money but it turns out to be some kind of paper to sign, a p-r-o-x-y, something I don't understand. The next thing I don't understand, will you explain to me?"

"Sure thing, Aunty, glad to oblige. But about a will, that stock is something you should say who gets it."

"There isn't anyone," she mused. "No one I can remember seeing for a long, long time."

The tremolo came back to Gerald's voice: "When the angels gather you to them I'd like to have a momentum of our happy hours together. That watch, for instance. Boy, that's a beaut!"

Momentum, she thought. Momentum. It sounded queer, and somehow wrong. Words did that nowadays — they stood on their heads and did not seem to mean what they used to.

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Gerald removed the watch from the birdcage hook, whistled at it appreciatively.

"It was Papa's," she told him. "I'll write your name on the back of it. I do that. I'll show you."

She darted about the room, exhibiting tiny scraps of adhesive on which she had written names, stuck to the backs of pictures and the bases of bric-a-brac.

Gerald wasn't sure the bits of adhesive would have any legal value.

"But lawyers cost money," she protested. "I couldn't afford one."

"It so happens you don't need one. I read this here book about wills very carefully, and I took the liberty of drawing you up a proper one. It's simple. I'll go over it with you, and if it's okay you can sign it in front of a couple of witnesses. Think we could dig up some people here in the house?"

"Mrs. Martin usually has a few friends over. I could go downstairs with you when you leave. It's good of you to do this. Since Papa's been gone there hasn't been a man around to take care of my affairs."

"A pleasure," he assured her.

He drew a single typed sheet from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to read:

" 'I give, devise, and bequeath all my property, whether real, personal, or mixed wheresoever located to,' " he raised his head, "what's the name of your church?"

"My church? I've got it here somewhere. I go every Sunday, at least I used to." She rummaged through the desk, came up with a dog-eared Gift Offering envelope which she handed to him. Gerald copied the name in ink in a space he had reserved.

"Paragraph Two," he intoned. "There are only two, and this one I'll mostly have to fill in, subject to your approval."

He leaned closer to the lamp and started reading again: " 'The sole exception to the foregoing is that I give, devise, and bequeath to my dear friend, Gerald Musgrove, the following.' "

He began to scrawl on a piece of scrap paper, dictating the words aloud to himself: " 'the solid gold watch which belonged to Papa. Also,' " he glanced at her, grinning mischievously, the corners of his eyes crinkled with stifled laughter, " 'also all the cash money found within my room, whatsoever sum that may be.' "

"Oh, go 'long with you!" She giggled, pushing his shoulder affectionately. "You're such a josher. I told you there's nothing."

He allowed his laughter to break free and she joined in with him, saying as she dabbed at her streaming eyes that he ought to take more, that he really should have the stock because he would know what to do with the papers the companies sent out. He wasn't too well off, she could tell, although he brought her flowers and wine and that pint of vanilla ice cream last night. He really and truly ought not to be so unselfish.

"Honestly, Aunty," he argued.

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"The watch and the money is all I want. And I don't really want that, not for a long, long while. I'd much rather have my sweet little aunty among the living."

She dozed off as he carefully copied his notes on the original document. When she awoke they went downstairs together. Mrs. Martin had a parlorful of guests who watched Miss Emmy flourishingly sign her last will and testament. Then Mrs. Martin and that dyed blonde from across the street with whom she was so chummy affixed their signatures as witnesses.

As she passed the parlor door again, after bidding Gerald good night, she could hear them cackling in there and she thought she knew the source of their merriment. They must think she was giving herself unholy airs, making a will when she was church-mouse poor.

They couldn't know she had something they'd give their worldly goods to get: a touch of magic. Brothers and sisters she had none, but miraculously she had sprouted a nephew who now looked after her.

When she woke up the next morning it was to the frightening suspicion that she was in for an illness. She'd never had a sick day in her life, never an ache or a pain, yet she felt dizzy and headachy and not up to snuff at all.

There was a funny smell in the room, one she couldn't seem to place. The window was closed, although she couldn't imagine why she had shut it last night. She tottered over to it. As she threw it open, the cracked pane with its gaping hole rattled menacingly. She wondered if Gerald were handy enough about the house to fix it. Papa used to be able to do things like that. She must remember to call Gerald's attention to it and ask him.

As she dressed she decided to give Mrs. Martin one last chance to find a glazier and save Gerald the trouble. On her way out to market she stopped at the parlor door and had already started to knock when she heard the landlady on the telephone.

"Honest to Pete," she was saying. "I'd sell the house like a shot if I could find a buyer. Furniture and all. The real estate man's already got the papers drawn up."

She must have met attempted dissuasion at the other end of the line, for she listened a moment before resuming:

"I know I get a pretty penny in rentals and the janitor does all the heavy work, except Miss Emmy's room which she used to be so fussy about letting a man into, but it's getting on my nerves. Especially with these plainclothes cops hanging around watching. Won't tell me *what* they're watching for, but it's plain that one of the tenants is up to no good.

"I suspect it's that pretty second-floor parlor front. I've always thought she had entirely too many uncles visiting her all the time. If you ask me, that girl is uncled to death. But she pays in advance, and I've looked the other way. Now I don't know—"

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There was another long pause. Miss Emmy raised a hand again to knock, then realized she had forgotten what she wanted to ask. All she could think of was how wonderful it would be if Mrs. Martin did sell the house and someone really nice replaced her as landlady.

She kept returning to that dream throughout the day. Anyone, she felt sure, would be an improvement on the incumbent, yet she tried casting this and that person she knew in the role, mentally auditioning them. By late afternoon she was convinced that the delightful possibility was a *fait accompli*, warranting some special sort of celebration.

She dressed herself elegantly, pinning a lavender bow in her hair. From the bureau drawer she took the picture that looked like Gerald. One of the boxes under the bed contained a number of broken picture frames, one of which did nicely. In its split corner she tucked a bouquet of artificial daisies. It looked very pretty on the mantel.

That evening Gerald was punctual but not alone. With him was the baggage Emmy had not seen since the first evening. Emmy almost wept with disappointment.

"I thought you wouldn't mind," he said nonchalantly, and she wondered how he could possibly have been so in error. "I brought my Cousin Mildred along. She's heard me rave about you and she's anxious to meet you."

The girl stepped into the room, although with wholly pseudo-daintiness she seemed to hold herself apart from it. Her plucked eyebrows rose critically as she looked about. The snapping eyes lit upon the picture on the mantel and suddenly her voluptuous mouth tautened.

"What's that doing there?"

"Nothing," said Emmy truthfully. "I just thought it looked like Gerald."

"Well, it doesn't a bit," said Mildred. "Get rid of it."

Emmy blinked back the tears so as not to give the girl the satisfaction. She had never been spoken to in such a tone. She had done nothing. She had behaved, as always, like a perfect lady.

Mildred repeated the command, "Get rid of it!"

"Mildred, dear!" Gerald was once more placatory. With a creature like that, Miss Emmy supposed, it was the only tack to take if one wanted to remain friendly cousins. "It doesn't matter. Let it be."

"Okay," contemptuously. "It's no skin off my —"

"Darling, don't!" He turned to their hostess. "Is dinner nearly ready?" he asked. "I'm starving. Don't worry about is there enough for Mildred. She eats like a bird."

Fortunately there was enough. Emmy's appetite was uncustomarily pawky. With the girl there the vibrations in the room were all wrong, and no amount of effort on Gerald's part could bring them into tune. The washing up, usually a happy affair with one assistant, became an un-

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wieldy maneuver with two, and Emmy was worn out by the whole dismal business when she returned to her rocking chair beside the window.

"Don't she remind you of Whistler's mother?" Gerald cooed dotingly.

"Sure," said Mildred. "Real quaint."

Miss Emmy promptly went to sleep.

The room was dusky when she awoke, lit only by the small bulb in the kitchen unit. Mildred had her hand inside the stove. Gerald yanked it out of there, twisting the wrist a little so that she dropped the screwdriver, or whatever it was she'd been holding.

"Don't be such a milktoast," Mildred squeaked. "Suppose she *has* got the keenest nose in town. If we turn it so little every night it'll be weeks before — Wouldn't it be better just to open the burners all the way just before we leave?"

"She'd smell it," Gerald said. "She'd turn it off, and then where would you be?"

"All right, then — let her get used to it gradual. Turn the control valve a little at a time, but does it have to be *this* little?"

Mildred's voice had risen. "Shut up, kid," Gerald implored, glancing toward the chair. "You'll wake her up."

Miss Emmy pretended she was still asleep, to spare him the embarrassment of knowing she had witnessed his cousin's inexcusable behavior. Not having been born yesterday she knew what the wretched girl was up to, and she knew now what the funny smell in the room was, the intensification of which had just awakened her.

This hateful young person was wasting the gas just to run up the bill. True, the smell had been in the room before Mildred entered it, but there was probably some mechanical reason for that which was beyond Emmy's power to figure out.

Gerald was trying to make her stop. She was glad to see him showing some backbone, but she did not propose to let him carry the burden alone. She had stock in the Gas Company. They wouldn't approve of someone who wasted their commodity. Yes, she would tell them what was going on, and she would let Mildred know she was on to her shenanigans.

As a prelude Emmy yawned extravagantly.

"I think I'll just go downtown tomorrow and pay a visit to the Company," she said pointedly. "I haven't been there for a long time. It's way far down somewhere." She waved an arm. "It'll take all morning, but I'll find it, you can be sure."

"That's right, Aunty," said Gerald, coming over to her. "Go ahead and live it up a little."

Miss Perkins, who had not even been born 'way back when the Consolidated Edison Company was known as Consolidated Gas, took her job with it most conscientiously. Every day provided fresh problems, but she had rarely had one so provocative as the one now being presented by the

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little old lady who sat at her desk.

Miss Emma T. Rice, owner of ten shares of Consolidated Gas, was either nutty as a fruitcake or terribly careless in her choice of friends, one of whom seemed to be trying to murder her by slow leak. It wasn't the Gas Company's baby, but someone had to look into it, the police or the Department of Welfare. Miss Perkins would not sleep a wink until she was sure that another person's bedroom wasn't filling with gas, barely perceptibly, until enough had accumulated to cause death. If the story were an hallucination, then the poor darling needed help of another sort.

"I'll take care of it," Miss Perkins promised, cutting short the third reprise.

"Pray do." Emmy shivered in her black going-downtown coat which was too warm for the day but too sleazy for the air-conditioned office. "We must stop this thievery, this willful waste of something that belongs to the Company and to me. It isn't Mildred's to throw away that way."

"It certainly is not," agreed Miss Perkins as she reached for a telephone.

It was a long trip home and when Emmy got there all she wanted was to crawl upstairs and lie down for a few minutes. But as luck would have it, Mrs. Martin intercepted her in the downstairs hall.

"Your niece was here this morning," she said. "I let her use my key to get into your room."

Emmy was in no mood to stand there and talk such nonsense. It just went to show how much Mrs. Martin knew. Miss Emmy had no niece.

Without bothering to answer she started up the steps.

"You've forgotten to pay your rent again," Mrs. Martin nagged after her. "You've skipped a week. I'd appreciate your giving me this week's and next's at your earliest convenience."

Emmy marched resolutely upward. Although her pillow looked inviting she was determined to gather the rent money before resting.

This was never a simple operation. To outwit pilferers she banked her small funds in various corners of the room, in an assortment of envelopes and old bread wrappers, or she tucked them between the pages of magazines or into the top of the sugar bowl.

Her method of making withdrawals was to search thoroughly, find all she could, spread it on the bed, count it, and then subtract the amount needed for the rent or whatever else had to be paid. Today she was astonished to discover that she had much more than usual, a great deal more than last time. In fact, the excess was so striking she was half inclined to think that someone, unknown to her, had been taking advantage of the excellent hiding places her room afforded. Miss Saucepan, perhaps, or Miss Bang-on-the-wall, the annoying neighbor.

But if anyone on the top floor might be presumed to be wealthy it was far most likely to be Miss Emmy. She came of a much older family, and it might very well be that she had

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always had this much money and had simply forgotten it. Certainly she would not mention her doubts to anyone lest she receive that suspicious glance, that tacit implication that Miss Emmy was slightly tibble-dotty and maybe ought to be put away somewhere.

But Gerald, that dear boy — he had *known*. He'd said she had a fortune. He had called her a recluse, a type which *ipso facto* has a roomful of banknotes. And, bless him, here they were. How exciting that Gerald should be so right, when she could have sworn . . .

After a while she went downstairs with the money.

It was so late when she returned that there was barely time to prepare Gerald's dinner, much less stretch out and relax. But the day which had been so unlike the average still had another surprise for her.

A strange man was waiting for her in the upstairs hall.

"Where the heck have you been, lady?" he asked irritably.

She was conscience-stricken. This must be the man from the Gas Company. She had asked them to send someone, then had not been here to receive him.

"I had to go out again," she apologized. "Something unexpected came up and I had to attend to it right away."

She opened the door, waving him toward the best chair by way of mollification. Then it occurred to her that his first interest was undoubtedly the stove, so she waved him toward that.

The man obeyed neither signal. He walked to the mantel and stood with arms akimbo before the picture which was not of Gerald.

"Some character!" he remarked.

"You know him?" she asked delightedly. "He resembles a gentleman friend of mine who will be here any minute. If you're still here you can tell me if they really do look alike. That Mildred," she uttered the name with fastidious distaste, "doesn't seem to think that they do."

"Neither did the lieutenant," the man said cryptically. "Mind if I open the window? The smell of gas in here is fierce."

He didn't wait for a reply. "You're lucky that pane's broken," he observed. "Yes, our friend had us guessing. He's grown that mustache, dyed his hair, and taken off a good deal of weight. The boss is a bug about false arrest, and he just wasn't sure.

"What stumps him is — here's a big-time crook. After he gets out he should live like a king, but our boy clerks in a grocery store and lives in a crummy fleabag. His girl's got runs in her stockings, though she looks like the kind that likes nice things when she can get them.

"We keep a tail on him for weeks, hoping to catch him spending more than he can reasonably explain having, but he doesn't step out of line once. He acts like a law-abiding citizen. He doesn't even spit on the sidewalk. And

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he not only helps old ladies across the street but escorts them upstairs. Then you give us the break we need, by going to Con Edison.

"This patrolman is sent over to check on your story. I'm standing around outside, like always, and I walk up to him to break the monotony, to find out what else is cooking in the house. When he tells me, I go right over and get a warrant for attempted homicide."

"That's nice," she said vaguely. "I'm sure you deserve it."

He frowned at her, then shook his head.

"I decide to make the pinch here," he continued, "so's you could identify him without having to go to the station. I've got a grandma myself. We won't have to bother you any more, ma'am, soon's we get his prints. We'll make it as painless on you as possible. Is that okay?"

How the man did chatter on, Emmy thought, saying anxiously, "I'm afraid I haven't been listening. I guess my mind's on the dinner I should be preparing. My guest will be here any minute. Isn't there something you want to do to the stove?"

He had a nice smile. "I'll wait," he said courteously. "It'll be a pleasure to meet him."

Miss Emmy began to peel potatoes. The man from the Gas Company rocked contentedly in the chair by the window.

Gerald was his usual punctual self. She went to the door to greet him, her heart springing as always at the sight of him. He scowled when he saw the man in the rocker and turned away as though about to leave in anger. Was he jealous? she wondered, almost unbearably flattered. But he couldn't have left just then even if he had wanted to, because two men were coming up the stairs abreast, cutting off his path.

"Is this the man?" the visitor in the rocker demanded. "Is this the one you heard talking over by the stove last night, ma'am, planning a little surprise party for you?"

"Yes," she said proudly. "This is Gerald."

There was something metallic in the gasman's hand — a tool for fixing the stove, she supposed. But she was wrong, because suddenly the thing was snapped about Gerald's wrist.

"Take him away, boys," he told the others.

And then, in spite of all the confusion, she understood. The Gas Company was going to punish Gerald for something that wasn't his fault at all, was wholly Mildred's. And Emmy herself was to blame for their learning about it in the first place. She wished there were some way she could make amends.

Perhaps there was. "Could I speak to you privately?" she asked the gasman, drawing him deeper into the room, although the others had already reached the lower landing. She had no wish to embarass Gerald further.

"I found today I had quite a bit more money tucked away here than I'd thought," she broached the sub-

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ject delicately. "It might help him."

She unsnapped her handbag, which was capacious but quite inadequate to restrain its contents; the bills burst forth like feathers from a ruptured pillow.

"Great jumping wheels of fire," said the gasman, and he began counting.

She kept asking him if there was enough to buy Gerald's freedom, but he paid no attention to her. He just shook his head and whistled as if he had never seen that much money before.

At last he found his tongue. "It's practically the whole payroll from that factory stick-up," he exclaimed. "The job our boy did time for. All that's missing is a measly few hundred."

"You need a few hundred more?" she asked, panicky. "I'm afraid I haven't got it."

"You will have — and lots more," he said, patting her shoulder. "There's a ten thousand dollar reward for recovering this loot, ma'am. And it's all yours."

"Oh, dear," she said, trying to keep all these figures straight. "But if you need more, that ten thousand won't help Gerald. I've already spent that much today. You see, I bought this house right out from under Mrs. Martin. I know the real estate man won't give me back any of the money."

She dabbed at her teary eyes and sniffed disconsolately.

"Poor Gerald," she sighed. "Such a good boy, and I can't do a thing for him. Well, anyhow," she brightened, "some day he'll have Papa's watch to remember me by."

"O"

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*A fine Western detective story in which Judge Waterman plays the part of a modern Solomon*

# JURY OF ONE

*by ALLAN VAUGHAN ELSTON*

ATTORNEY HARVEY WATERMAN, more often called Judge Waterman because of long, distinguished service on the bench in New York, alighted from a train at Black Creek, Wyoming. After registering at what passed for a hotel, he went directly to a two-story frame structure which served the community as a hospital.

The young woman in white on duty there greeted him with a smile. She saw at once that he was a stranger, elderly, of commanding dignity, with a thin, rubicund face and wise gray eyes. She looked at the card he gave her. What would a New York lawyer be doing out here?

"Ten years ago," he told her, "on an August 17, to be exact, a patient was brought to this hospital. It was about 3 o'clock in the morning. The patient's name was Andrew Taggart. His age at the time was sixty-two. Will you please see if your records confirm that?"

Nurse Betty Malloy, too young to have been there ten years ago herself, brought out a record book. She thumbed back through it and found the case.

"Here it is, Mr. Waterman. Andrew Taggart, 62; checked in 3:20 A.M. on August 17, ten years ago. Discharged five weeks later. A head wound and a bullet hole through the leg."

"In which condition," Waterman pointed out, "he couldn't have come alone to the hospital. My question is: Who brought him here?"

Betty Malloy looked at him quizzically. She had an intelligent face and nice brown eyes. "I'm sure I don't know, sir. But Mrs. Murdock might, I suppose."

"Who is Mrs. Murdock?"

"She preceded me in this job. She's retired now, but she still lives in town."

"Could you call her over here, please? It's extremely important."

Betty nodded and made a call on the telephone.

Ex-Nurse Murdock arrived promptly. She was a broad-hipped woman of 50. "I remember the case pretty well," she said. "I was on duty alone when the night bell rang. It was 3 o'clock. I went to the door and saw a cowboy supporting an elderly patient. He helped me get the patient to a bed."

"Did the cowboy give his name?"

"I don't think so. The important

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thing was to get the patient on a bed. Then I called Doctor Jarret and asked him to come over. When I turned from the phone, the cowboy was gone."

"Could you identify him if you saw him?"

"I'm sure I couldn't. During the minute he was with me, every bit of my attention was given to the patient."

"Was the patient able to talk?"

"Not till the next day. Then he told us he'd been assaulted and robbed in a mountain camp. He was hit over the head from behind, so he didn't see the outlaw. The outlaw took his money and his two horses. When the victim came to his senses and tried to crawl toward his rifle, the outlaw shot him through the leg."

"How brutal!" exclaimed Betty Malloy.

The older woman went on: "Mr. Taggart said he lay there helpless all day, slowly bleeding to death. At nightfall a cowboy came by and gave him first aid. The cowboy put him on his horse and led the horse ten miles to this hospital."

"Didn't they talk on the way?" Waterman questioned. "Didn't the cowboy tell Taggart his name, or where he worked?"

"The patient," Mrs. Murdock remembered, "was in no condition to talk. He was unconscious most of the way in, and in acute pain."

"It was reported to the sheriff, I presume?" Waterman suggested.

"The sheriff was out of town that night. At the far end of the county on a murder case. When he came back we called him to the hospital and he listened to Taggart's story. The same sheriff is still in office. You can check with him if you like."

Waterman first looked up Dr. Emory Jarret. Jarret remembered the case, but could add nothing to the information given by Mrs. Murdock.

Sheriff Jesse Sneed, a gray, shaggy man, drove up in a dusty roadster just as Waterman arrived at the jail.

"Sure," Sneed said, "I recollect the Taggart case. Was away when it happened. Didn't get the dope on it till it was three days old. . . . Come on in, Mr. Waterman, and unload your mind."

In the shabby jail-office Waterman asked, "Didn't you go to the scene of the crime and try to track the outlaw?"

Sneed made a deprecating gesture. "Nope. What was the use? The man had a three-day start by then. There'd been rains and the creeks were up. Nope, the only chance was to try to find a man with Taggart's gear. His saddle horse, loaded pack horse, rifle, and wallet. The man took everything in camp, Taggart said. I picked up a few suspects, searched and questioned 'em. Didn't find anything. Taggart got well, so it wasn't murder. I had plenty of other grief in those days to keep me busy."

"But didn't you look up the rescuing cowboy as a witness?"

"A witness to what? He didn't wit-

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ness the crime. He just drifted by ten hours after it happened. Taggart said that himself. No use to look up the cowboy 'cept to thank him." Sneed's face creased in a grin. "He sure had thanks comin' to him, all right. It ain't often a cowboy'll walk ten mile in his tight boots, leadin' his own horse."

"Could you take me to the spot where the crime occurred?"

Sneed stroked his chin. "Don't reckon I could. Taggart just said it happened about ten mile up Black Creek. Which ain't very definite. . . . How come you wanta run this outlaw down, Mr. Waterman, after all these years?"

"I don't," the attorney said. "My only interest is to locate the Good Samaritan — the cowboy who rescued Taggart."

"How come you wanta do that?"

"Andrew Taggart," Waterman explained, "had no estate ten years ago. But in the last ten years of his life he accumulated a fortune. He had no living kin. He didn't want to die intestate. So recently, just before he passed away in an upstate New York county, he made a will. I drew it for him and am named executor. It leaves his entire estate to the man who brought him to the Black Creek hospital ten years ago."

Sneed sat staring. Then he gave a low whistle. "This here's real money, you say?"

"It runs into six figures," Waterman said.

The advertisement he inserted in the local weekly newspaper read:

"If the man who brought Andrew Taggart to the Black Creek hospital on August 17th ten years ago will get in touch with Attorney Harvey Waterman at the Black Creek Hotel, he will learn something to his advantage."

The sensation spread rapidly. Waterman wanted it to spread. The more people talked about it, the sooner the heir would be found.

The local lawyer dropped in at the hotel. He'd heard of Waterman by reputation as a distinguished Eastern jurist. "Anything I can do to help, Judge?" he offered eagerly.

"You might introduce me," Waterman said, "to any prominent ranchers who happen to be in town."

The local lawyer took Waterman up the street, hailing first one cattleman and then another. "Hello, Si. Meet Judge Waterman of New York. . . . Judge, this is Si Simmons of the Kaybar."

Waterman's question was always the same: Around bunkhouses and corrals, or at roundups, had the rancher ever heard a cowboy mention the incident of rescuing Taggart?

It brought no result. One grizzled stockman remarked, "A puncher who'd do a thing like that, Judge, ain't the kind who'd go around braggin' about it."

Waterman nodded gravely. "I see what you mean. The strong, silent type."

"That's it, Judge. He'd take a thing like that in stride. All in a day's work.

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Maybe this was some wanderin' waddy just passin' through. Might've kept on goin' plumb to Montana afore he found his next job."

It began to look hopeless when three days passed without any response to the ad. Then Waterman ran into Betty Malloy on the walk and invited her to lunch with him at the hotel.

The young nurse, like everyone else in town, was in a state of excited suspense about the bequest. "It's like a fairy story!" she exclaimed. "Think of it. Chaps to riches! I hope I'm around when you find him, Judge Waterman. I want to see the look on his face."

"Maybe you will," Waterman said. "I've got an ad in the paper. Maybe he'll walk in while we're at lunch."

"What will he be like?" she wondered. "Tall, short, homely, or handsome? Surely Mr. Taggart described him to you, Judge."

"I'm afraid he couldn't," Waterman admitted. "Taggart habitually wore glasses. He didn't have them on when he was struck from behind by the outlaw. Ten hours later a cowboy appeared from the gloom of nightfall. Taggart was only half conscious. He vaguely remembered a figure of medium height in corduroys and a droopy-brimmed sombrero. In the darkness, without his glasses, details didn't register. He was boosted to a saddle and clung there in great pain while the cowboy, walking ahead, led him through the night. Finally he completely lost consciousness and had to be roped on. After an experience like that, how could he describe the man's face to me ten years later? He had the impression of a very young man, under twenty-five, which would place him in his thirties now."

"I *do* hope you find him, Judge. It would be so just and beautiful. Bread cast on the waters! But how can you be sure? Suppose a man walks in and says he's the heir. How could he really prove it?"

The point had disturbed Waterman more than a little. He hesitated for a moment. "I've a way to test him," he said finally. "Taggart, while dictating his will, described certain peculiar physical features of his camp on Black Creek. I jotted it all down. When a claimant appears, I'll make him guide me to the spot. I'll know it when I see it."

"Perfect!" Betty applauded. "No one knows the exact spot except the rescuer, so only *he* can take you there."

Waterman didn't hear her. He was looking beyond her at a waitress who was ushering a youngish, sun-blackened range rider toward their table. The man had a lean, bony face, dark hair and eyes, and was a trifle above medium height.

"This is Judge Waterman," the waitress announced, and retired to the kitchen.

"I'm Joe Murphy," the man said. "Were you lookin' for me, Judge? I saw an ad in the paper."

Waterman regarded him critically.

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The man had rope-blistered hands. He wore blue jeans tucked into spurred half boots. His flannel shirt was patched and faded. His face was hard and scarred, but he had a soft Southern voice.

"Sit down, Murphy," Waterman invited. "This is Miss Malloy."

The cowboy's glance at Betty was frankly approving. "Glad to know you, ma'am." He drew up a chair and sat down.

"I'm looking for you," Waterman said, "if you happen to know who it was that picked up Andrew Taggart ten years ago and brought him to the hospital here."

"It was *me*. I brought him in," Murphy said.

The attorney inquired cautiously, "Did you ever mention it to anyone?"

Murphy narrowed his eyes reminiscently. "Seems to me I told my bunkie about it, when I got back to the Box T line camp. Laramie Pete, they called him. But Laramie lit out for Idaho five years ago and nobody's seen him since. What's it all about, Judge?"

"You were working for the Box T Ranch at the time?"

"Yeah. I was a strayman paired with Laramie at a line camp on the Sweetwater. Couple o' years after that I filed a claim on the Little Wind, and I been raisin' calves there ever since. . . . Mind if I smoke, ma'am?" Joe Murphy brought out a sack of makings.

"What were you doing when you found Taggart with a broken head and a bullet hole in his leg?"

"I was lookin' for Box T strays."

"Could you guide me to the exact spot?"

"Reckon I could. I got a pretty good memory for places."

"Can we go there in a car?"

"Not all the way, Judge. They's a road runs about six mile in that direction and then turns off. From there we'd have to go bronk-back through the timber. So we might as well go all the way bronk-back from here."

"Very well, Murphy. Get two saddle horses and we'll start at once."

The cowboy got to his feet with a jingle of spurs. "Okay, Judge. . . . Hope I see you again some time, Miss Malloy." He strode from the dining room, and they heard him clank to the walk outside.

Waterman looked at Betty. "What's your verdict on him?" he prompted.

"I'd have to know him better," she said, "before I could say. But if he takes you to the right place, he *has* to be the right man. You said nobody else can go there."

"Nobody else," Waterman agreed gravely, "can show me the exact windfall Taggart was hunched against when the rescuer picked him up. I'll tell you a secret, Betty, and you mustn't mention it to a soul: At one end of that windfall stands a tall twin fir. The left split of the twin has a knothole about seven feet above ground. Taggart, before the outlaw assaulted him, had poked his tobacco pouch in that knothole to keep it from getting wet in a sprinkle. It should still be there."

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In the early afternoon Waterman rode with Joe Murphy up a canyon trail. It was an old wagon road whose ruts, since the advent of automobiles, had been filled with gravel. Waterman wasn't used to saddle travel. He was sore and stiff before they'd gone five miles. They met no one except a sheepman who came rattling down the trail in a wool-laden truck.

Murphy rode confidently ahead. Waterman noticed that he seldom spoke unless questioned. In many ways he seemed to fit the character of a man who, after a good deed, would say little or nothing about it.

Six miles out of town the road veered to the left up a side canyon. "Right here's where we take off through the woods," Murphy said.

For the last four miles, boughs and briars slapped at Waterman. There was no trail at all, not even a game path. Murphy led on over a ridge and down into a deep, trackless wilderness beyond.

They came finally to a small fork of Black Creek. Here Murphy stopped and took bearings. "Seems to me it was upcrik from here a piece," he said, "and on the other side."

He guided his mount that way and Waterman followed. After a few hundred yards the forest opened a little. Douglas fir predominated, with here and there a tawny pine or a copse of aspen. Murphy forded the creeklet and stopped by a 30-inch fir windfall on the other bank. "Right here's the place," he said.

Waterman saw an outcrop of reddish rock. The root end of the windfall spanned the creek like a footbridge. Near the other end grew a tall twin fir. It was all exactly as described by Andrew Taggart on the occasion of dictating his will.

"In just what position was Taggart lying, Murphy, when you found him?"

"He was sittin' with his back to that windfall, right about here." Murphy indicated the exact spot.

"That is correct," Waterman conceded. He rode to the split fir and saw a knothole in the left-hand bole about seven feet above ground. Reaching in, he drew out a rotted tobacco pouch. "Yes, this was Taggart's camp, all right."

Murphy said nothing. He looped a leg over his saddle horn and rolled a cagarette.

"You gave first aid to a bullet wound in his leg, Murphy. Which leg was it, the right or the left?"

The cowboy concentrated. Then he grinned disarmingly. "Danged if I can remember," he admitted.

It was the first test he'd failed on. Waterman tried him with one more: "Taggart must have had a bedroll, coffeepot, frying pan, and other camp equipment. Can you explain why we don't see any of it lying around?"

Murphy licked the flap of his cigarette and struck a match. "Sure. While I patched his leg, Taggart told me what happened. He got up that mornin' and broke camp. Roped everything but his rifle on a pack mare. Then somebody conked him

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from behind. The guy made off with Taggart's saddled horse, his packed mare, and his rifle."

It was the right answer.

Waterman dismounted stiffly. "Taggart had taken off his glasses just before the assault. Let's see if we can find them."

They kicked around among the leaves and pine cones. It was Joe Murphy who found the rusty rims of a pair of spectacles.

"That makes it conclusive," Waterman said. "Let's go back to town."

On the ride back Joe Murphy spoke only once. It was to inquire, "That Miss Malloy I met at lunch, Judge. Is she your secretary?"

The attorney smiled. Most men would be thinking about the imminence of an inheritance instead of a girl. "No, Murphy. She's a nurse at the hospital."

His own mission, Waterman concluded, was accomplished. Joe Murphy was definitely the heir. For who else could have guided him to that camp site? And who else could have given the right answer to every question except one?

Stiffness had all but paralyzed Waterman by the time they reached the hotel. He dismounted painfully.

Then a tall rangeman came down the hotel steps. A youngish, personable man who inquired briskly, "Are you Judge Waterman?"

"I am."

"Then I guess you're looking for me, Judge. I'm Wes Allison of Sheridan. Just got in on the train. I'm the man who packed Andy Taggart into town here, ten years ago."

Waterman stared at him. Then he turned to Joe Murphy, expecting some explosive contradiction. But none came. Murphy merely gave Allison a hard, straight look and said nothing.

"If that's true," Waterman suggested warily to Allison, "then you can guide me to the campsite where you picked up Taggart. Can you?"

"Sure, I can," Allison asserted.

"How do we get there?"

The man from Sheridan described a route which conformed roughly to the one Waterman had just ridden. Had this rival claimant followed them? Not if he'd just got off a train, which could be checked. Waterman looked sharply from one man to the other. Seen together, they appeared equally plausible. Either of them could have been the rescuer of Taggart.

But a new and startling angle jolted Waterman: Either one of them could have been the assailant who'd robbed Taggart. *Two* men, and only two, could know every detail of that spot and incident. The outlaw and the rescuer. Murphy? Allison?

Early in the morning Waterman was again on his way to the campsite. But this time he was taxied the first six miles by the local garageman. Where the road turned up the side canyon, he found Wes Allison waiting with two saddled horses.

"Stay here till I get back," Waterman instructed the garageman. He

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got out and hoisted himself stiffly to a saddle. "Lead the way, Allison."

Allison rode into the woods. The direction he took was slightly different from the one taken yesterday by Joe Murphy. Which proved he wasn't following yesterday's tracks. They crossed a ridge. Pushing through the brush beyond, Allison stopped and seemed a bit confused. "A long time since I been here," he said. "Maybe we ought to bear right a little."

He bore to the right and Waterman followed.

"What were you doing," the attorney asked, "when you found Taggart's camp ten years ago?"

"Amblin' through the country," the man said, "lookin' for a cattle job. Found one up in the next county on the Cross Q. Last coupla years I've been at Sheridan, buying and selling horses. . . . We're getting a piece too high, Judge. Let's bear left again."

They hit the little creek well above the place where Murphy had struck it yesterday. Wes Allison splashed through the riffles. "It's a piece downstream, if I recollect right."

They came presently to a windfall. "This looks like it," Allison said.

It was the old campsite. "Just where," Waterman inquired, "was Taggart lying when you picked him up?"

Allison studied the spot in detail before answering. He dismounted and walked around. He smoked a cigarette over it. He took off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. "It's been a long time," he said again. "But seems to me it was right about here." He kicked the bark of the windfall within a yard of the place Murphy had indicated yesterday.

Waterman questioned him shrewdly. The man was deliberate in his responses, and didn't seem too sure of them, but all the answers were right. He even passed a test on which Murphy had failed. "I had to patch up his left leg, Judge. Then I heaved him on my bronk and headed for town. Had bunions on my feet, time I got there."

That night, in the Black Creek Hotel, Harvey Waterman wrestled with the knottiest judicial problem he'd ever faced. More than a hundred thousand dollars hung on a decision. Which of the two men had assaulted Taggart, and which had rescued him?

In the morning he conferred with Sheriff Sneed. "Make inquiries about these two claimants, Sheriff. Check on Allison at Sheridan. Check with the owners of the Box T and Cross Q. Get all the information you can and put it in an envelope addressed to me at the post office here. Meanwhile, I have a plan of my own."

He went next to the hospital to see Betty Malloy. "Did you ask Mrs. Murdock to look at both men, Betty?"

"Yes, I did, Judge. But it's no use. She simply can't remember what the man looked like. She says he might be either of these two, or neither of them."

"Then we'll have to try something

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else. You can help me, if you will."

She was excitedly eager to help. "What can I do, Judge Waterman?"

He gave precise instructions, then returned to the hotel. Joe Murphy and Wes Allison were waiting for him in the lobby there.

Waterman said to them bluntly, "It's my opinion that one of you is guilty of an armed assault ten years ago, and of attempted fraud right now, and ought to be in jail. And that the other saved Taggart's life and should inherit his fortune."

Joe Murphy flushed. He sat with narrowed eyes staring at Allison, but said nothing at all. Allison said, affably enough, "Can't blame you for figgering it that way, Judge. Any way you look at it, one of us is a cockeyed liar."

"I have inquiries out," Waterman announced. "While waiting for responses, I suggest that we three go to Taggart's old campsite and camp there together for a few days. I could size you up there, get to know you better. Any objections?"

"Suits me," Allison agreed promptly.

Joe Murphy, still with a brick-red flush burning his face, merely nodded.

"In this fair weather," Waterman suggested, "we won't need a tent. Just get three saddle horses and a pack mule."

"Sure." Allison grinned. "Three bedrolls and a grub outfit. When do we start, Judge?"

"Right after breakfast tomorrow."

In the morning Waterman again taxied to the bend in the road. His bones were still stiff, and he had to save himself from the saddle as much as possible. Murphy and Allison were waiting there with three horses and a packed mule. Allison seemed cheerful enough. But Joe Murphy said coolly, "I don't cotton to this much, Judge. It's too much like one of those police line-ups."

"Rogues' gallery, he means," Wes Allison chuckled. "But not being a rogue myself, it doesn't bother me any. Shall we ride?"

It was slow going, and took more than an hour to make the four miles to the old Taggart camp. Both Murphy and Allison were experienced campers, and a comfortable camp was soon made.

"I'll be cook and dishwasher," the man from Sheridan proposed. "Murphy, what about you rustling the firewood and wrangling the stock?"

The work was so divided. All day Waterman narrowly observed both men. He probed their backgrounds. Occasionally he baited a sly trap; as, "Which tree was Taggart's rifle leaning against?"

Each man asserted that he'd seen no rifle. Naturally, only the felon could have seen it, since the felon himself had taken the rifle away with him. It was ten hours later, at nightfall, that the rescuer had arrived.

Joe Murphy answered questions simply, in as few words as possible. He volunteered no information. Wes Allison offered it liberally. He named a dozen ranches he'd worked for. Wa-

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terman made notes covering them all.

Each man did his work willingly. Wes Allison proved to be a prime cook.

By bedtime the attorney felt more at sea than ever. It was hard to believe that either of these cowboys had once assaulted and robbed a camper. Yet if he watched them closely enough, patiently enough, one of them might make a slip. Character, he was convinced, must be the final tip-off.

Waterman slept a troubled sleep on a bed of pine needles Allison had made for him. Was either man armed? He had stipulated that no firearm of any kind should be brought along.

Directly after breakfast he drew Allison aside. "I want you to ride to town and call for my mail. I'm expecting information. Do you mind?"

"Anything you say, Judge." Allison saddled a horse and headed through timber toward the town road.

He was back by early afternoon. The mail he brought consisted of reports from the sheriff. Waterman found in them nothing particularly prejudicial to either man. One of them said: "Neither of those guys are saints, Judge. I've checked away back. They've both ridden with plenty of tough, quick-triggered outfits. Murphy once spent a night in jail, after a barroom brawl; and Allison once dealt monte in Langley."

Allison continued to be cheerful, talkative; Joe Murphy remained silent, stiffly aloof, like a man whose pride resents an insulting inspection.

Another night passed and Waterman came to no decision.

After breakfast the second morning he handed each man a paper and pencil. "I want each of you to jot down anything you remember about Andrew Taggart. How was he dressed? Describe his build and face the best you can. Anything that comes back to you. I don't expect you to be photographic. Naturally, you won't remember everything after ten years." He paused, and then added, "I don't need to tell you how important these descriptions might be."

Each man retired to a log and wrote down what he remembered about Taggart's appearance. Waterman gave them plenty of time. Then he collected the papers. "Murphy," he said, "today I want you to ride in for my mail. Will you?"

Joe Murphy nodded. He saddled a horse and rode away.

Waterman sat down and made a shrewd study of the two descriptions. They substantially agreed, he noted, in every detail except one. The single point of variance caught Waterman's attention. All morning he brooded over it, becoming more and more impressed with its significance.

When he analyzed it, it seemed as pretty a clue, and as solid, as any he had ever encountered as a jurist.

His eyes, when Murphy returned from town, had the stern look of a judge about to pronounce sentence.

Facing the two claimants he announced gravely: "Joe Murphy and Wesley Allison, I know now which of

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you assaulted Taggart and which of you saved his life. I know which of you must be prosecuted for a crime and which of you will inherit Taggart's estate."

"Your descriptions," he went on, "differ in a single detail. One says Taggart was clean-shaven; the other says he had a thick stubble of beard. Naturally, they would so differ. Taggart arose at dawn, had breakfast, shaved, then broke camp and packed his pack mare. Then he was struck from behind by a felon. The felon saw him as he was at that moment, clean-shaven, and never saw him again."

Waterman saw one face tighten and the other relax. He continued: "Taggart lay helpless ten hours. His rescuer came at nightfall. It was three in the morning when the rescuer got him to a lighted hospital room. That room was the first clear light in which the rescuer saw Taggart. *He saw a bearded face.* A beard grows in twenty hours." Waterman rubbed a hand over his own face, which, clean-shaven yesterday, was now stubbled.

He proceeded: "But I needed a character clue too. So I prepared for one. . . . Wesley Allison, yesterday when you rode to town you passed a shabby Mexican country woman standing by a stranded car trying to change a flat tire. She was having difficulty; she didn't know how to manage the jack. I arranged for her to be there. She was there again today in the same dilemma when you, Joe Murphy, came along. Which of you stopped to change that tire for her? And which of you passed her by?"

The lawyer paused to let the import of his words sink in. "She'll be here shortly, to report," he warned them. "Each of you already knows what that report will be: That the man who saw only the clean-shaven face of his victim passed her by, and that he who saw only the bearded face of a patient did *not* pass her by." The judge turned his head. "She is a jury of one, still out, but I hear her coming now."

Allison tried a laugh of bravado. It came flat from his throat. "It's all a lot of foolishness," he croaked. "It don't mean a thing."

The saddled horse which Murphy had ridden today stood by. Allison stepped quickly into the saddle and dug in with his spurs.

As the man loped off into the timber, Joe Murphy made a dash for another mount. But Waterman stopped him: "No use chasing him, Joe. We know who he is, and that he's at least guilty of fraud, so let the sheriff pick him up."

Then another rider trotted into camp from downstream. She seemed to be a poor Mexican woman. Her full skirt was torn and ragged. A *rebozo*, the wide scarf of the Mexican countrywoman, was pulled forward over her head, almost concealing her face. But after she threw back the *rebozo* and rubbed away a little of the brown dirt smudged on her face, her voice came to them young and gay.

"Thank you, kind sir," Betty Malloy said to Joe Murphy, "for changing my tire."

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*Not long ago we called your attention to the wide diversity of detective, crime, and mystery short stories which, with malice aforethought, we have offered you in the past thirteen years — every type of whodunit, howdunit, and whydunit we could discover which had a high enough level of writing and plotting to guarantee relaxation or stimulation.*

*Now we present one of the very few 'tec types not yet printed in EQMM — the story of crime as written for the so-called "experimental" magazine, with emphasis on literary impressionism and modernistic technique. This particular story first appeared in "transition" (Paris), issue of June 1930. The author, Norman Macleod, is a well-known novelist, poet, teacher, lecturer, and editor, whose work in all fields has been praised by such critics, connoisseurs, and craftsmen as Max Eastman, Eugene O'Neill, Archibald MacLeish, William Rose Benét, Erskine Caldwell, and many others. Because Mr. Macleod's avant-garde writing is admittedly obscure, the author has been gracious enough to add an explanation of the sources and origins of his story, unveiling the hidden meanings he originally had in mind . . .*

# TWELVE KNIVES

*by NORMAN MACLEOD*

Starting with a penknife silver handled. The body was never seen, but I remember stuck in the floor beside the doorway twelve knives at various angles. And several others must have been thrown into a space beyond comprehension. Four in myself that left no wound. Neither could they be seen.

But nobody saw the body, not even I. But yet I was sure and he was dead. Stretched upon the table invisibly.

"Saying there there there

Positum, Alive, Petronius three names on the doorstep. Possibly known in Philadelphia anywhere stepping incognito the music of incalculable targets, practicing.

"Knowing there there there.

And in my body, a taste of alcohol and the knowledge of something dying, for no reason at all brown as a cut in the head.

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## *Psychoanalytic Criminology and Environmental Explanation of "Twelve Knives"*

This prose poem was written in an old two-room adobe house facing east on the plaza of Old Albuquerque, New Mexico. In the front and to the north of the house, once a part of an old hacienda with walls three feet thick to withstand Indian attack, were tamarisk trees and the Church of San Felipe de Neri (1706).

Following the practice of Hart Crane, I played a record of swing music over and over again, drank highballs, and allowed the stream of consciousness to flow unrestrained as I wrote poem, prose or what-not, one after one. (Needless to say, I was young.)

I think the basic emotion (suggested by the various symbols: "penknife," "the body," "twelve knives," "alcohol," and "cut in the head") was one of guilt. When a boy I had been grievously and psychologically hurt by another boy. For many years I often wished that boy dead. (Perhaps there are lines of parallel here with voodoo.) And then when I was still a young man that boy I hated so was found murdered in an alley in Cleveland. The gun with which he was killed was never found nor was the murderer ever identified.

Perhaps subconsciously — and I think this is true — I felt responsible for the murder of that boy, later a young man — that I was in a true psychological sense the murderer. And who can say for sure? Perhaps I was, although I was removed from the scene of death, by time and space.

The "penknife" should have been gold except that even subconsciously I was avoiding the truth, for the knife given to me by my father whom I had not seen for years and would never see again was gold and not silver; and I lost it when I was a boy as I did everything he had given me — and everything he had given me, watch, coin case, knife, coins, etc., was gold.

"Positum, Alive, Petronius" (the Roman satirist, First Century A.D.) were assertions of life and subconscious denials of guilt which was even more deeply acknowledged and yet rejected as far as the mind had strength to assert denial — yet withal with a satiric acknowledgement (Petronius) of the mind's failure to acquit itself.

The conclusion of course being that the murderer suffers longer and as deeply, if not more deeply, than the one murdered.



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*'Tec Tip: Keep your eye on John F. Suter. Watch his progress in EQMM . . . His first story, "A Break in the Film," was a slice of life in terms of nostalgia — a reminiscence of the author's boyhood told with appealing simplicity and tenderness. His second story, "When Are People Going to Learn?", abandoned the past and tackled a big problem confronting people today; it carried a message of importance to all readers. Now, in his third story, Mr. Suter leaves both the past and the present, and delves into the secrets of the human mind . . . Yes, keep your private eye on this comparatively new writer. The road ahead is long and it will have many rough stretches — but Mr. Suter is definitely on his way.*

# THE SEEDS OF MURDER

*by JOHN F. SUTER*

ELLIS, THE PRIVATE DETECTIVE, pointed a long finger at the sheaf of typewritten pages he had just laid on the desk in front of Kendig.

"Your man's all in there. Everything. We've really done you a thorough job, gentlemen. I repeat, he's all there."

"How much would you like to bet?" I said.

My question was out of place, but it startled Ellis. He had almost leaned back in the metal chair, but it brought him forward, his shrewd deep-set green eyes snapping.

"Well, now, Doctor Carter, you're not being fair. You haven't read it yet." Then the expression on the detective's ellipsoid face relaxed. "Well, of course, the thing that made you gentlemen call on me . . . I forgot."

I think my colleague Kendig was a little annoyed. He usually is when the lines begin to appear in his plump face.

"I'm sure your report is as thorough as you say, Mr. Ellis," said Kendig. "Your agency was highly recommended."

Ellis inclined his head, his domed forehead gleaming. "Thank you, Doctor. We did try to do a job for you." He glanced at each of us searchingly. "Maybe you'd like to ask some questions before you read this?"

Kendig's brown eyes gleamed behind his glasses. If he were as impatient as I, there were two of us fighting to keep calm.

"I believe we might have one or two." His voice was calm and even. "Don't you think so, Harry?"

I studied the end of my cigarette. "I have one question." I leaned over and flicked ash as I spoke to cover up any undue emotion. "You remem-



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ber, Mr. Ellis, we gave you a name: Iris. What did you find out? Who is Iris?"

Ellis took a drag at his own cigarette. "Gentlemen, as far as we're concerned, there is no Iris. I knew how you'd hammered at that when you gave us this job, and we've been extra-careful. Wallace doesn't know any Iris now, and we can't find that he ever did know any. And that means that we not only know the names of all the girls in every neighborhood where he ever lived, but we've been through the rolls of every grade he went through in school."

Kendig pulled at the tip of his left ear. "What was his mother's name? Full name?"

"Anna Marie Trumbull was her maiden name, changed to Wallace on marriage. No Iris among either the Trumbulls or the Wallaces." His wide, thin-lipped mouth quirked briefly. "And none of his toys or possessions was ever named that, either."

Kendig looked at him with interest. "An original notion which we didn't suggest to you, Mr. Ellis. May I ask if such service is customary?"

"No, Doctor. But with two psychiatrists for clients, I thought a fancy touch would be right up your alley."

I thought to myself that I'd like to get Ellis maneuvered into an analysis some day. Aloud, I said, "What did you find out about young Wallace and his mother?"

"First off, the old lady's dead. You know that?"

We both nodded.

"I'd bet Bill Wallace's life's been a lot brighter since that happened. It was natural causes, by the way. Cerebral hemorrhage." Ellis tossed this last out casually.

Kendig showed no emotion. I hoped that I did not, either.

Ellis glanced quickly from one to the other of us. Then he shrugged.

"Nothing would've surprised me, is what I mean. When you read what I've written, you'll see. I guess he's had one long fight of it through his twenty-two years — twenty-one of them, anyway. She died a year ago. She beat him often, lots of times without much excuse. She ran off all his friends. He never had any pets, that goes without saying. She made him take odd jobs to earn money when he was a kid, and she took all the money for herself. Didn't need it, either. When her husband died, seventeen years ago, she was left pretty well fixed. And as for young Bill and girls — you can guess."

He stopped and looked at us again. "Maybe this fits in with something you've uncovered? I mean, I read somewhere about mother fixations and all the trouble they cause."

Kendig said carefully, "What you've told us is very helpful, Mr. Ellis. I'm sure your report will be even more helpful."

"Thanks." He was still watching us, looking for some reaction. It was hard for me not to show one, even if people do say I remind them of "a strong, silent Westerner." I've never tried to live up to that reputation,

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and it comes hard when I have to be impersonal.

"Phil," I said to Kendig, "I imagine Mr. Ellis must be wondering when we're going to pay him."

"No, no, Doctor, "Ellis said. "It never crossed my mind. I'll send you a bill at the end of the month. You needn't be in any hurry. I never had any question —"

Kendig reached for a pen. "The University's credit is good, I'll grant. But Doctor Carter and I are paying for this. You know nothing about *our* credit."

Ellis protested more. "No, I wouldn't take it at this time. Haven't figured up all of the expenses. Let me send you a bill."

Kendig laid the pen down deliberately. "I like to get things settled, Mr. Ellis. If your agency hadn't been recommended as extremely honest, I'd be certain you had something unpleasant in the back of your head."

Kendig outclasses me in many ways, but sometimes he can miss the obvious in ordinary matters. "I think the only thing Mr. Ellis has is curiosity," I said.

Ellis's work evidently had thickened his hide over the years. He did not redden or show any other sign of being flustered. "Well, now, Doctor Carter, I'm human. Sure, I'm curious. But when I'm asked to do something, I do it. If the customer doesn't want to elaborate, that's his business. If I get too nosey, I lose customers. It's not smart to lose customers."

Kendig crossed his arms. "I hear a certain amount of claptrap about detectives respecting confidences, even under extreme pressure. Is there any truth in it?"

Ellis spread his hands. "I'm still in business. Would I be, if I didn't know when to keep buttoned up?"

"Phil," I said, "we're going to publish, anyway."

Kendig looked foolish momentarily, then covered up. "Certainly, Harry. But perhaps we won't include this one." He stared at me for a moment, then looked at Ellis. "Mr. Ellis, I think we'll take a chance. You'll tell no one what you hear?"

"Doctor, when I go out that door I'll have forgotten it. That's a promise."

I smiled. "You'll not forget this, Ellis. Maybe officially. But not personally."

Kendig got up and walked across the office. First, he locked the door. Then he went to the safe and removed several reels of tape. He ended at the tape recorder, placing one of the reels in the machine.

"Mr. Ellis, these tapes were recorded two months ago. They have been played back only once since they were made. Doctor Carter and I have avoided them in order to keep open minds." He fiddled with the machine. "Doctor Carter and I have been experimenting with hypnotic regression, using some of our students as willing subjects."

"Phil, better keep the discussion nontechnical. We don't want to seem to be trying to put one over."

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"Sorry. To translate, Mr. Ellis, we have hypnotized some of our students and have suggested to them that the date is such-and-such in the past — say, April 10, 1934. The student relives his experiences, and we note them."

Ellis leaned forward, interested. "This is real? They don't feed you a line?"

"We think not. Their accounts are perfectly consistent with the age level of the time suggested."

"Sounds like you're onto something."

"It's nothing new," I said. "Several good men have tried it and reported on it. We've been looking for some original line to follow, that's all."

Still working with the recorder, Kendig said, "This tape is William Trumbull Wallace's. We have suggested that he is age twelve. I'm going to skip the portion where we hypnotize Wallace. Take my word for it — he *was* hypnotized."

As he spoke, I saw again the tall form of Bill Wallace stretched out on the couch — big and sturdy as a forest giant, dark, tightly-curling hair — but big, sad eyes and a cleft chin. A woman wouldn't have a chance: he'd either have to be worshiped or mothered.

I heard my own voice coming from the speaker: *Bill, you know what day this is, don't you? It's March 26, 1944.*

He answered: *March 26, 1944. Yes.*

*Tell us about it, Bill.*

*I'm coming home. Coming up the front walk.*

*What kind of walk, Bill? Cement? Brick?*

*Brick. The sidewalk out along the street is cement. It's brick from the house to the street. Laid in squares, the bricks turned a different way in every other square.*

Ellis nodded in agreement. He'd seen that walk.

*All right, Bill. What kind of day is it?*

*It's a pretty day. The sun feels good. Gee, I hope winter's really gone. There's a few crocuses along the walk, ready to open, it looks like . . . Now I'm on the front porch, taking off my overshoes.*

*Why overshoes, Bill?*

*Huh? Mom — Mother — said to wear 'em. Said the ground's still muddy, even if the snow is gone.*

*All right. Go on, Bill.*

*Now I'm going in and hanging my jacket in the hall closet . . . Hello, Mother . . . No, I didn't leave the overshoes by the front door. Here they are, on the closet floor. I scraped 'em clean, too . . . But Mother, I'm not very late! I came straight home, I only lost a minute or two helping Mr. Townsend get his storm door off. I held the door steady while he pulled the pins on the hinges . . . Why, yes, he did. He gave me a dime. I thought it was too much, but he made me take it . . . No, I've still got it . . . Aw, couldn't I keep it this time? My old pocketknife's sprung — look, I'll show you — and I'd like to get enough to buy a new one . . . I do too need a new one! Lots of times, when I'm doin' something for somebody . . . But I can't fix it.*

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*I've tried. Well, I was careful I've had this one four or five years, I guess . . . Oh, all right! Here's the darn dime . . . What're we having for dinner, Mom,— Mother? . . . Oh . . . Oh, sure, I like potato soup all right. It's just . . . Could we maybe have sausage sometime? I like sausage . . . Oh — yeah. I'm sorry. I forgot it upsets you . . . No, no, forget I said it. I don't want you to be sick just on account of me . . . Now, look, Mother, I don't want you to: Please! . . . Huh? Today? Nothin' special. Just another day . . . Well, now, wait. I forgot. Doctor Redmond's been talkin' to me about joinin' the church . . . Well, he says I am old enough, and that it's a sort of responsibility. And that's like you always say, I better be watchin' my responsibilities. Anyway, if I go and study at the church one night a week from now until . . . Aw, Mother, why not? But I am old enough! I know what I'm doin'! . . . Well, no, I've never pledged any money at church, yet. Aw, I don't think they can make me sign up for any definite amount . . . I'd just give what I could. A nickel a week, like now . . . It wouldn't? I think you've got the wrong idea, Mother . . . Now, I didn't say that. No, I didn't say you lied. Anybody can make a mistake. Maybe you're mistaken . . . Anyway, I want to join. I like St. Matthew's. I like to go there. They treat me nice . . . No, I never said you didn't. I wasn't even thinking it . . . But I am gonna join . . . Yes, I am . . . What if I tell Doctor Redmond you won't let me? . . . Oh, yes, I would, if he wanted to know what I had decided to do . . . I wouldn't go right to him, but I wouldn't lie about it . . . Mother! You use that belt on me for this and God'll punish you! . . . Yes, He will! I know He will! You're mean to me, and you won't let me come unto Jesus like He said! He said* forbid them not, *He did! I try to be good, I try hard, and when I want to be extra-good, you won't let me! No, you won't! You won't! . . .*

Kendig turned the volume down and looked at Ellis, who had been listening intently. There were only a few more feet of take left, and the sound on them was unintelligible.

"You get the idea, Mr. Ellis."

Ellis nodded and wiggled a finger toward the report he had given us.

"It fits." He leaned back in his chair. "You know, that's a pretty good recall."

"Ellis," I said, "it's not just recall, as you probably think of it. For that period, he *was* a twelve-year-old again."

Kendig rewound the tape and slipped another one on.

"Let's see what you think of this, Mr. Ellis."

I tried to see which one he was using. "What's this one Phil?"

"This is Terry. I thought we'd better use a warm-up."

I turned to Ellis. "Terry is a different subject. A girl, Edna Terry. Please listen carefully."

Ellis looked at me as though he thought we had sold him out. "That name wasn't in your instructions. We didn't come across any Terry girl."

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"You shouldn't have," I said, casually. "She has no bearing on the case. Another subject, entirely."

The recorder began to speak. Kendig was talking:

*Edna, listen carefully, this is very important. Today is June 14, 1958.*

Ellis's reaction was all I'd hoped for. A slap in the face would have had the same effect. He muttered, "*Three years from now?* For the love of —!"

Kendig waved him to be quiet.

*June 14. Why, yes. Yes! . . . This is the day! It's a* beautiful *day . . . There are the birds outside the window . . . The morning light's pure gold . . . I wonder if* he's *up this early, too? Oh, Bob, Bob! Four hours until 10 o'clock! Mr. and Mrs. Robert C. Stone . . . What? Oh, no, Mother, don't fix me any breakfast. I don't think I could eat a bite . . . Strength? Who needs strength? I could live on air today . . . You're sure everything's ready for the reception? Did Mrs. Black ever send over the extra punch cups? I've been so excited, I didn't notice . . . I wonder where Bob's going to hide the car? He said for me not to worry, Frank Hughes and that crowd would never find it . . . Well, I'm not so sure. That Frank can think up* more *things . . . I wonder if I'll be like Betty McCulley when I'm supposed to say,* I do? *She was so meek and mousy all through the ceremony, up to that point, and she practically shook the rafters when she said it. If everybody hadn't been crying so, she'd have brought the house down . . . Mother — try not to cry, will you? . . . You're not really losing me! . . .*

Kendig leaned over and shut it off.

"I think you get the idea, don't you, Mr. Ellis?"

Ellis's jaw was slack.

"You're kidding!"

"No."

"It was framed! It was somebody rehearsing for a play. Or you fixed it up to throw me off the track."

Kendig went on working with the machine. Unconcernedly he said, "It's the genuine article, Mr. Ellis."

"We'd give anybody an affidavit," I said.

"However," said Kendig, staring at me through his glasses, "there are different points of view."

He picked up another roll of tape and fitted it into the machine.

Ellis looked at me uneasily. "I thought I had both feet on the ground. Now —"

Kendig started the machine. "Gentlemen, we return to young Wallace."

My voice came out of the speaker:

*Now, Bill, you feel quiet and relaxed?*

*Yes, I feel fine.*

*All right. We're going ahead now, to September 15, 1960. Got that? September 15, 1960.*

*September 15. Yeah . . . What a day! Boy, am I tired! I'm going to need glasses at this rate. My eyes . . .*

*Bill, I don't get you. Where are you?*

*Huh? Oh — getting out of my car. I've got it parked in the driveway.*

*Driveway? Where? Where are you living?*

*Why, at my house. You know.*

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*You've been there. Just a little place. Well, you never did come back after that first time . . . Not all the place a man could want, but we'll have a better one some day . . . I hope.*

*What kind of car? What does it look like?*

*Car? . . . Oh, just a Chevvy . . . Last year's . . . Two-door. You remember the ads . . .*

*All right, Bill. I'll shut up. You were going into the house.*

*Yeah . . . Door still sticks, a little . . . Wish I could remember . . . Oh, hi, Iris . . .*

I didn't dare look at Ellis's face.

*Oh, just another day, chasing columns of figures. Thank God for the IBMs, or it really would have been one for the books. I think I'll have a quick one . . . Look, let's not get off on that again. This is my house, too, and if I want a drink, I'll take one . . . You don't have to like it. If you'd married a drunk, it would be something different. You've never seen me anything but sober, have you? . . . Well, have you? . . . All right,* don't *admit it . . . That's what I like about you. You expect me to admit what a heel I am every five minutes, but you never admit anything. Hell with it . . . Well, now I feel a little better. Where's the paper? . . . What? Who? . . . No, thanks. Tell 'em to look for another boy. Tell 'em to hire themselves a full-time accountant . . . I should keep books for Dwyer's Confectionery in my spare time! . . . Well, sure I appreciate your trying to line it up, but life's just too damn short. I don't get out enough as it is. Work all day and spend all my spare time keeping the place up . . . Don't know why you fussed about it when I wanted to hire out the painting. We'd have got it done a lot quicker, and I wouldn't have used up so much of my vacation . . . Well, maybe having my own office would give me more money to hire things out and maybe it wouldn't . . . What do you do with all the money I give you? Save it? Sure, maybe a day'll come when we need it, but I figure we need some of it every day . . . Oh, hell, I'll take the pup for a walk . . . Here, Mike, Here, boy. Come on, boy. Here, Mike . . . Iris, do you know where Mike is? . . . Well, all right, but you can give me a civil answer about where my dog is. I know you don't like him, but I do . . . What? WHAT DID YOU SAY? . . . Just for a bunch of dahlia plants? With the mattock? You hit him with it and then had the garbage man haul him off? . . . NOW YOU LOOK HERE, Iris . . . You don't let me have a life of my own. You hoard all our money so it's no good to us. You want me to work twenty-six hours a day because you're greedy for more. And then, because an animal gives me a little affection, you . . . I'M SICK OF YOU! SICK OF YOU! . . . LET ME GET MY HANDS ON YOU, YOU . . . NO, YOU WON'T GET OUT OF IT . . . SCRATCHING WON'T HELP . . . GO ON, CHOKE, DAMN YOU . . . CHOKE . . . Iris. Iris! . . . Oh, my God . . .*

Kendig turned and snapped the switch. Ellis's face was greenish-white.

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The back of my shirt was clammy.

Kendig clasped his hands and stared calmly at the detective.

"That's Iris."

Ellis shakily lit a cigarette. "And we don't know who she is. No way to warn her! Damn it, there *must* be somebody we missed!"

Kendig shook his head. "Not necessarily."

Ellis looked at me in appeal. "You mean, he hasn't even met her yet?"

I said, "We don't know that."

Kendig spoke carefully, "It's not so fantastic as you might think, Mr. Ellis. Iris might be a name which has caught his fancy. We are inclined to think — or I am, at least — that these 'future' manifestations are traumatic, and —"

"Stick to two-bit words, Phil," I said. "No sixty-four dollar ones, remember?"

He readjusted. "What I mean to say is — we know, from the subject's past history, that his childhood was unhappy because of his mother's influence. You confirmed that yourself. We also know that questions about *specific* things in the future — his house, his car, you recall — drew only vague answers. Young Wallace was explicit only about things which are projections of what he has on his mind at the moment."

Ellis grimaced. "What things on his mind!"

"Doctor Carter is a little more the romantic than I am. He refused to dismiss these 'futures' as rationally as I do."

I looked at Ellis and smiled without humor. "If I could make money at it, I'd go back to farming."

Ellis considered each of us in turn. "Well, which is it: Did he look into the future, or didn't he?"

Kendig put his clasped hands behind his neck. "He did not. I'll be glad to go over it in more detail, if you like."

I got up to unlock the door. "Ellis," I said, "*it doesn't matter.* Don't you see: *If he did see the future, somebody's got to watch for Iris. If he didn't, the seeds of murder are there, anyway.*"

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*AUTHOR'S NOTE: So far as details are concerned, the cases described in "The Seeds of Murder" are wholly fictitious. However, the scientific experiments which suggested the plot are absolutely true. For further information please consult pages 472 and 473 of "Science," Volume 119, Number 3093, issue of April 9, 1954, where the experiments are reported by Robert Rubinstein and Richard Newman of the Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, Yale University.*

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*Wondrous is the creative range of the human mind . . . Compare, for example, three of the six new stories in this issue of EQMM — those written by Shirley Barker, Veronica Parker Johns, and John F. Suter. All three, of course, are in the same field — detection and crime — yet they are totally different from one another. Indeed, can you easily conceive of three short stories in the same genre that could be more varied in approach and background, more dissimilar in treatment? One re-creates the past — detection in New England in 1699, against a setting of witchcraft and mass hysteria; another is a human-interest story of a little old lady living in present-day New York — a study of larceny and old lace; and the third is a psychological probing not only of the past and the present, but also of the future, with characters utterly different from those in the first two stories.*

*Now consider still another original. Need we tell you that this story is altogether distinct — in every way — from the other three . . . Wondrous indeed is the creative range of the human mind.*

# (UNTITLED)

*by FRED LEVON*

THIS STORY SHALL HAVE NO NAME. I could call it *The Snob*, or *The Frustrated Murderer*, or even *The Story without a Title*, but I shall not name it at all. It is far more fitting that way. You will soon see why.

My wife is English. We met in London during the "blitz" and were married at her home. Since the war we have resided in New York — at Peter Cooper Village, in the lower east side of Manhattan — which is not particularly British in any way. Millicent, however, has never seemed to mind and I really believe she has been happy in America, content with her choice, never seriously longing to return to her homeland. And the only discernible way in which she has carried something of England across the ocean and into our present lives has been through her subscriptions to a few British periodicals, such as *The Tatler* and *Punch*.

It was two years ago that the episode of which I write began. I was at breakfast with Leslie, our four-year-old daughter. Millicent had just returned from getting the mail.

"Well, look at this!" she exclaimed, indicating an article in one of her magazines. *The Englishman in America*, it was called, and the author was Charles Cort-Kittershaw. "Why, it must be cousin Charles!"



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I had met Charles only once but I remembered him vividly. A generation older than Millicent, he was a tall, slender, gray-haired individual who took pains to accentuate a natural resemblance to Anthony Eden. I could recall his stiff, unsentimental wish that we would be happy in our "sudden" marriage, his shock to think that Millicent would soon be an ocean away, his hope that this did not mean she would abandon England entirely. And then, learning that I am a writer, his brief inquiry into my work (chiefly mystery fiction), his apparent decision that I ranked with the contributors to the "penny dreadfuls," and his all-too-plain dismissal of me as of no consequence. Charles also indulged in writing, but only, he carefully explained, of nonfiction. And although his work showed considerable skill it was to him more a diversion than a source of income. Belonging to the only really wealthy branch of the clan (his family controls the Empire White Flag Fleet of transatlantic liners), he had never been obliged to depend upon the proceeds from his small literary output.

"Oh, Lord!" Millicent sighed, looking up from her reading," it's our Charles, all right. And he all but names us. What an annoying snob!"

I took the magazine. The article was undoubtedly droll and amusing, but reading it through American eyes and recalling the patronizing manner of the author, I was unable to suppress a degree of resentment.

"Do you suppose he came across *Garden of Weeds* and recognized himself in Hamilton Drude?" I referred to my most successful detective novel, which had reached England the year before. "I wonder if he considers this some sort of revenge?"

Millicent pondered for a moment, then she said, "Charles is capable of anything. He's clever with his writing but also a bit cruel. Any offense you may find in his work is strictly intended."

She laughed, and Charles was temporarily dismissed.

Dismissed, that is, for about four months — until one evening in October, when the telephone rang. I answered with the customary "Hello."

"Edward, is that you?" The accent was crisp, undiluted by much time away from home. "This is Charles Cort-Kittershaw, Millicent's cousin. We met once, you know."

"Yes, of course. How are you?"

"I'm fine. Catherine and I are staying in Connecticut. I'll explain it all in a moment. Is Millicent there?"

I put her on and they spoke with that forced courtesy which stems from family ties bound by duty rather than by affection. Charles and Catherine (his wife) were in America for an indefinite stay while he acted in some official capacity involving the family steamship company. In a remote section of Connecticut they had found a haven which they felt had some charm, and Charles commuted two days a week to the office in Manhattan. He deplored the trains. Catherine found the climate ghastly. They

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begged that we drive up as they longed to see someone "from home."

Millicent took the number and promised to call back.

"It's a dreadful chore," she said, after hanging up, "and he annoys me almost as much as he does you, but it *would* be a bit sticky to just say *No* . . ."

"There's no need to refuse," I told her. "Let's make a weekend of it."

So the result was that the three of us — Millicent, Leslie, and I — drove to Connecticut on a Saturday morning about a year and a half ago.

The Cort-Kittershaw "haven" was a huge and rather stark affair set in a park of ancient yews and unclipped hedges. The vast grounds flowed to all sides like the wild moors at Wuthering Heights. One felt that surely, nearby, there would be a brook and a stable of horses and perhaps, at any moment, a fox hunt in full cry hurdling the gorse.

A pair of enormous dogs galloped out to meet us.

"Wouldn't you know!" Millicent whispered.

Leslie found an instant fear of the animals and climbed into the safety of my arms.

"Hello, Charles," Millicent cried as our host appeared at the door. "Call off your beasts — they have my daughter terrified."

"Nonsense," said Charles, "they are as gentle as lambs. How are you, Millicent?" And to me: "Hello, Edward."

The house was a museum of fine woodwork and stiff, pedigreed antiques. Although kept in excellent condition there was no hint of recent alteration, modernization of plumbing, or any of the newer conveniences of the kitchen. In spite of the seasonable cold, most of the windows were open.

Almost immediately Catherine served tea and freshly made scones (pronounced, you may be sure, without the *e*). All her china was from England, and she had also brought over a butler and maid, not wishing to risk what she called "inferior domestic help." Proud of her cooking, however, she preferred to cope with the kitchen unaided. She is desperately lonely, I thought.

Having neither toys nor playmates to distract her, Leslie soon became bored and fussy. It was clear that Charles disapproved of this. Millicent gave the child her pocketbook, a concession generally reserved as a last resort.

Inevitably, the conversation turned to friends and family.

"How is Uncle Cliff?" Millicent inquired and then quickly added, in order to dispel any suspicion of unfairly poaching on the family's nobility, "He's really not an uncle to me, but he's always been my favorite."

Uncle Cliff was everyone's favorite, one of those rare and wonderful people with a capacity to be universally admired. Being the widowed Duke of Burbridge, he resided alone in the clan's one feudal castle, an enormous turreted structure with mullioned windows; but not being a member of

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the steamship wing of the family, he was obliged to allow tourists to troop through his home behind a paid guide.

"Uncle Clifford's quite well," replied Charles, to whom the man was authentically an uncle. "He's developed pernicious anemia, you know, but he's taking liver injections and seems to be back in good health."

"Yes, we had heard," Millicent said. "According to my information, pernicious anemia can be quite benign under proper management. And how is Roger?" Roger was Clifford's only child, a bachelor now in his forties.

"Roger's in Canada," said Catherine. "He's taken some obscure post that requires him to travel a good deal. He may come to Washington next year. Perhaps we'll see him then." Looking to Charles, she added, "*If*, of course, we are still here ourselves."

"Yes," sighed Charles, with the air of one suffering an indignity.

Catherine's roast beef and Yorkshire pudding were excellent, but dinner was an uncomfortable meal. The room was drafty and the conversation was strained with Millicent's unease over Leslie's restlessness. Despite a blazing fire, the library in which coffee was later served was not much more pleasant. Rising impulsively, Catherine insisted that we see her herb garden before the evening settled into darkness.

Millicent and I followed her and stepped between painfully geometric beds of healthy, fragrant plants. In her pride Catherine's face opened with the first real happiness we had seen it reflect. Suddenly, through the murmur of our admiring utterances, Leslie's cry reached us.

"It must be the dogs!" Millicent said, running for the house. But the child had broken a teapot and sat on the floor among the fragments, frightened and in tears. Charles, tight-lipped, stood over her.

We apologized profusely, blaming ourselves for allowing Leslie to remain up so late after the day's journey. Catherine begged us not to think again of the accident. Charles, however, remained unconsoled and spoke little during the remainder of the evening, his face showing a rather startling ugliness of mood. Millicent withdrew with the child, and shortly thereafter we all retired.

Breakfast next morning was again cold and awkward. It came as only a mild surprise when Millicent announced: "Charles, Catherine; I hope you won't mind if we leave now. Leslie seems to be coming down with a cold and she so easily develops fever. I think we ought to get her home."

Catherine forced a promise that we would return, and we left.

The trip home was uneventful. We listened to the Sunday radio programs and Leslie, who had awakened in terror during the night, napped on the rear seat.

Back in New York, Millicent revealed her duplicity. "I didn't want to tell you there because you would have made a row, even though it would have been justified." She showed me Leslie's arm, which bore a

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large and discolored bruise. "She says that Charles shook her and called her a nasty child — yesterday when she dropped the teapot."

My heart turned with pity for the child and in fury at Charles. My first impulse was to call back in protest over his behavior. Millicent implored me to allow her to handle the matter by mail. "There is something unforgivable about cruelty to a child," she agreed, "and I shall not ask you to see Charles again."

But in the end I could not resist putting the matter into a story I was then writing and which was to appear in a magazine I had seen on the Cort-Kittershaw coffee table and to which Charles apparently subscribed. I titled the piece *Suffer Little Children*, certain that it would catch his eye. And with this childish retaliation I allowed the matter to rest.

A few months later Charles, who had clearly also succumbed to an impulse at reprisal, had a piece in the *Review* in which he was critical of the "lax" standards of discipline used by parents in America.

"He rather forced the point, don't you think?" Millicent asked. "I'm sure he wrote it purely in spite. It's a wonder he could sell it at all."

"He's probably under contract with the *Review* to do a series about Americans. He's only distorted it a little to suit his purpose."

She shrugged, and again the Cort-Kittershaws were dismissed, both of us confident that we had seen the last of them.

But in this we were wrong. After months of silence Catherine called and spoke to Millicent, whose responses changed from chill politeness to sorrow to concern. "Well, I'll see . . ." she promised, and cradled the phone.

"Roger was killed in an airplane crash," she explained, her face lined with sadness. "You remember, he was Uncle Cliff's only child. Catherine and Charles went to England for the funeral and returned just a few weeks ago. Catherine says she's terribly worried about Charles, that he's been acting strangely since they got back. She begs that we come up, to put her mind at ease. There's really no one else to whom she can appeal . . ."

I said nothing, not knowing what to say. Millicent, close to tears, fell into a chair and looked to me for aid.

"Well," I decided, "if it upsets you, let's go. In times of need a family should forget its grievances."

So again, last month, we drove to Connecticut. After debating the issue we took Leslie with us, repeating the cliché about bygones.

Charles did indeed look changed. Although not thinner or ill in appearance, he spoke and gestured with a new nervousness, as if eager and expectant. Clutching a cane, he limped on a swollen, unshod foot.

"My podagara," he mumbled, his face a pantomime of anguish. "I'll have to walk with a stick for a bit."

"His gout," Millicent whispered. "He's a little proud of it. So traditionally aristocratic, you know."

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The Cort-Kittershaws spoke first of the funeral and of Uncle Cliff's great grief. "I really don't think he'll recover from it," said Catherine. "He feels that all is lost and there is no future for him. Everyone's terribly alarmed. He won't see his doctors and an old nurse gives him his injections. In the latest letter we learned that his anemia has increased and that he's weakening steadily."

"He's closed the castle," Charles added, "although he doesn't have a bob. We're all trying to help. Catherine's sending tins and foods that are hard for him to get and I . . ." His voice trailed away, his thoughts apparently elsewhere.

In spite of Charles's hyperkinetic behavior, however, it was Catherine who caused us the greater concern. Looking frequently to her husband, she spoke distractedly, clutched her hands together, and snapped impatiently at the blameless dogs at her feet. She arose twice to make tea, and Millicent finally went with her to the kitchen. . . .

After a long interval the tea appeared, with Catherine far more relaxed. Shortly thereafter Millicent suggested that we leave, indicating with a gesture that our mission had been accomplished.

As we donned our coats Charles limped into the library and emerged with a package. "I wonder," he asked hesitantly, "don't you go down the West Side Highway in the city?"

"Yes," I replied, "is there something we can do for you?"

"Well, if you wouldn't mind awfully, this is something for Uncle Clifford and I thought if you could drop it off with one of the chaps at the steamship office it would go to England on the next crossing, which leaves tomorrow. I don't think I'll get into town this week, because of my foot."

I assured him that I didn't mind and took the package. He instructed me where to make the delivery, and we left.

"Poor Catherine," Millicent said in the car. "She's never had children and feels her loneliness now, surrounded only by her beautiful china and art treasures and those cold, untouchable antiques. She's filled with terrible premonitions and fears. The maddening thing, of course, is that Charles is incapable of tolerating weakness or showing sympathy. She needed a good cry and feels better now for it."

I asked when they planned to return to England.

"Not for a while yet, I'm afraid. Although they hate it here they're obliged to stay for several years. Apparently a group of them take turns at the New York office and this was inescapable."

Millicent turned to look at Leslie in the rear seat. "Oh, Lord!" she cried, "look at what Leslie's done!"

I stopped the car to inspect the extent of the damage. Leslie had opened the package Charles had given us for delivery. It consisted of a dozen small vials of the type put out by pharmaceutical houses, and from the labels (which read *Liver Extract* and *Vitamin*

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$B_{12}$) it was clearly the medicine for the Duke's pernicious anemia. The child had succeeded in opening two of the vials and had spilled their dark brown contents on her dress.

"Well," I said, when the mess had been cleaned up, "there's no need to worry Charles over this. I'll see if I can't replace these two through the druggist and I'll take the package to the pier tonight."

The pharmacist was very obliging. Not demanding a new prescription, he produced two identical bottles. "Do you want the others replaced, too? I notice the cellophane collars have been removed from all the caps."

"Does it make any difference?"

"Not for immediate use. But if it's going to do a good deal of traveling the stoppers may work loose."

"Well, we'd better not take any chances. Is this hard to get in England?"

"Liver and $B_{12}$?" He frowned. "No, I don't believe so." He took out ten more bottles. "Well, here's your even dozen."

In the car I searched again, turning up the rear seat and looking over the floor and into the crevices. There was no sign of the cellophane collars to which the druggist had referred. I drove to the pier on the west side and delivered the package, newly tied and labeled.

When I returned to Peter Cooper Village, Leslie had been bedded for the night and Millicent was preparing a late supper.

"Who would inherit the Dukedom?" I asked, "if Uncle Cliff were to die?"

She considered it for a moment. "Why, Charles, I suppose. Now that Cliff's only child is dead, I suppose Charles is next in line. Why?"

"And he would return to England immediately, would he not, to take over the estate?"

"Probably. Why?"

I told her about the cellophane collars that were missing from the vials. "I'm sure Leslie didn't remove them. That leaves only Charles and Catherine."

"My God, whatever for?"

I suggested the obvious. Millicent recoiled in disbelief. "It's too monstrous!"

"Well, I don't see how we can ever know. Unfortunately, I poured out the old bottles at the pharmacy. But why should Charles go to so much trouble to supply something so readily available in England when there are other things Uncle Cliff needs more?"

"Catherine *does* send other things — tins and foods," Millicent said, groping, "and now that Uncle Cliff isn't seeing the doctors I suppose these drugs are no longer easily available to him through the National Health Service. And Charles, looking for something Cliff needs . . ."

"But this package is going alone, on a special trip. Is it really so urgent? Is it possible that Catherine has found Charles tampering with the Duke's medicines, and can't quite appease her conscience?"

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"Oh, dear," Millicent cried, "how will we ever know?"

"Well, at least we can be sure that the present supply is the genuine article, and if you want, you can take over sending a few packages yourself."

"Yes, let's! But how can we stop Charles from sending his?"

"I don't know," I said reflectively.

I slept on it, restlessly. And during the next day I evolved a plan.

Seeing my physician over a minor complaint, I asked in passing for some "information for a story." Pernicious anemia, he assured me, is quite adequately treated with Liver Extract or Vitamin $B_{12}$. If, however, the injections are replaced by plain water (colored, say, with vegetable dye), the patient will appear to become refractory to his therapy and ultimately die.

And then we had a letter directly from Uncle Cliff. In response to a card from Millicent he wrote that he had been quite stunned by his son's death and had suffered a few bad weeks, but was glad to report that during the last fortnight he had felt much better. He had decided to reopen the castle to tourists now that he felt up to it. He hoped that Millicent and her family would come for a visit.

But what about Charles, you ask?

Well, I doubt if the Cort-Kittershaws will be vacationing in England next year.

You see, I decided to write up this narrative, altering very few of the facts and names — not enough to make it unrecognizable to Charles. I am sending it to another magazine to which he subscribed, the one in which you are now reading. The editors are a decent sort and quite partial to my material. I have asked them to make an exception and schedule this for immediate publication, for personal reasons. They are intrigued by the implications. Is there a real Charles Cort-Kittershaw, they ask?

Well, that will remain my secret.

And Charles'.

If he is blameless, then this is entirely a piece of fiction and no harm will be done; but if the assumptions I have made strike uncomfortably home to Charles, I am sure he will not dare to make any further moves.

For I think I understand Charles fairly well. I can now see the deep insecurity which he hides behind his poses, his literary conceit, his snobbery. I pity the loneliness that he and Catherine share, and yet fail completely to share. I can sense his desperate need to be admired by those of whom he approves. And I think he will find in this story the irony of his own false dreams, his striving for something which will now probably not be attainable — at least, not for many years.

For this narrative and Charles Cort-Kittershaw will both share one deficiency — a deficiency which may be an asset to a fiction story, but to Charles will represent a bitter disappointment.

That deficiency is, as you have already seen, that neither the story nor Charles will have a title.

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## WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE

*We are happy to welcome Shirley Barker and her first detective short story to the pages of EQMM. Miss Barker is the well-known historical novelist whose first major book,* PEACE, MY DAUGHTERS, *was based on the witchcraft delusion in old Salem, and whose most recent novel,* TOMORROW THE NEW MOON, *traced the beginnings of religious tolerance in America, against a setting of Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard.*

*The author was born and raised in New Hampshire. Comparatively early she became firmly convinced that the great works of literature were the Bible, the Iliad, Shakespeare, and* THE HOUND OF THE BASKERVILLES; *and even if pressed now, she is not at all sure she would change her mind. In the course of time she received degrees from the state university in New Hampshire and from Radcliffe College, and while she was still an undergraduate she had her first book published — a volume of verse in the Yale Younger Poets series.*

*Later she lived in New York City, earning her living as a reference librarian in the American History Division of the New York Public Library. This proved to be the turning point in her life: not only was she completely happy in her work, but both the work and the place in which she did it stimulated her to write a novel; and just as if she were obeying a scientific law, she inevitably gravitated to the historical novel.*

*For her prize-winning detective short story, Miss Barker went back to the theme and background of her first novel. "The Fog on Pemble Green" takes place in 1699, eight years after the Salem witch hangings. The chief character is a young minister, a Divinity student of Cotton Mather. He comes to Pemble Green to investigate the circumstances of a mysterious death and to forestall, if possible, a recurrence of the old witchcraft hysteria. But young Thomas Warne finds that he has more to combat than the whispers of witchcraft: it is the evil influence of the Devil himself that the young student of Divinity must vanquish. And the truly dangerous adversary is that instrument of Satan, the fog which too often settles in the minds of the credulous and the careless — the fog of suspicion and hate and mass fear . . . So the giant wheel of history turns, and surely the problems of America in 1699 anticipated and foreshadowed the conflicts of America in 1955 — as well as the insecurities of the whole Twentieth Century world . . .*



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*Shirley Barker is in complete command of her material. The historical data and Seventeenth Century flavor are compelling and convincing. In Mistress Reeve's house, tall and square, soundly built of red brick, with red turkey curtains in the windows, the women gathered for quilting; and while they sat on damask cushions, deep in wainscot chairs, the servants went round with silver trays and baskets, heaped with venison, ham, corn cake, pumpkin stewed with molasses, and chopped walnuts, and for each there was a cup of spiced wine or cherry brandy. In such homely details, in the nature descriptions and the atmosphere of an old New England village, you will hear the accents of Hawthorne. As we once remarked, the historical detective story is one of the most difficult types of fiction to write; but it is also one of the most rewarding.*

# THE FOG ON PEMBLE GREEN

*by SHIRLEY BARKER*

AS HE CAME ONTO PEMBLE GREEN he had to ride past the burying ground, at the right hand side of the Boston Road and a little above it; and since the young minister's business was as much with the dead as with the living, he left his horse by the wall and climbed the rutted path that wound among the headstones. After a few steps he took off his tall black hat and carried it in his hand, not so much in reverence as in joyous response to the warm, blue weather — treacherously warm for a day in March — and to the sunshine on the drowned fields of Essex County. But he was not there to rejoice in the gentle season; he was there because a woman had died — because, her neighbors said, another woman had killed her.

The place he sought was not hard to find. It was near the top of the hill, where he could stand and look about him — a mile east to the wide curve of the sea, or to the woods and fields on the other three sides, or straight down into the town itself, a cluster of small houses about the common land, a low church, a flooded brook, and a water mill. Mistress Margery Reeve had been dead less than a month, he knew, and no turf covered the mound of clay and rubble they had heaped above her; but her gravestone was already set — a tall, rounded slate with a death's-head at the top.

*Margery, wife of Stephen Reeve*, it read, *Feb. 21, 1699. Aet. 18. Bewitched to Death.*

Thomas Warne, twenty-one years



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old, newly Master of Arts from Harvard College, copying manuscript to earn his bread while he further studied the body of Divinity with Mr. Cotton Mather, stood up straight and serious in the spring sunshine. The sea wind ruffled the fair hair on his forehead with no respect to the store of learning beneath it.

"Were you bewitched to death, Margery?" he asked, aloud. "I do not believe it — I do not believe there be any witches, Margery."

Dame Margery did not answer him. He had not expected she would, but he wanted to wait a little before he went into the house where she used to live, and talked with the men and women who had known her; wanted to grow accustomed to the sharp, salt taste of the air in this eastern county where it was said to be as easy to see witches and other instruments of Satan as to see rabbits, where there had been such a hanging time about it scarce eight years ago. On every lip, in the tavern at Saugus where he had slept last night, he had heard two names — Margery Reeve and Joan Alder. The word had passed there that Mr. Haverley, the minister at Pemble Green where Margery died all in the short space between one noon and the next candlelighting, had sent to Boston to ask for advice and counsel from his brother ministers. No one in the tavern had guessed that the stranger, lodged there for one night only, was on his way to help Mr. Haverley. Perhaps not even the ministers in Boston knew that young Warne meant to be of what help he could to Joan Alder. Not that he had ever seen or known her — rather because he believed in her innocence, she being charged with a crime which to his mind no mortal could commit.

He sighed a little as he read again the crude, scraped letters — *Aet. 18.* Then he strode down the hill and led his horse toward Pemble Common.

A group of children, slipping and sliding as they played tip-cat in the muddy road, pointed out Mr. Haverley's house, small, but with a wide chimney and decent gables, placed at the right of the church where the land sloped away to the brook and the mill with its clacking wheel. Not far from the mill, he noticed, as he crossed the minister's front yard, stood the most pretentious of the houses, tall and square, soundly built of red brick, with red turkey curtains in the windows. He tapped on the oak panels of Mr. Haverley's front door, and a sturdy, brown-faced servant maid opened it. A moment later he was seated in the study.

"Ah, yes." Mr. Haverley leaned forward in his greatchair and placed the tips of his fingers together while he stared at the younger man out of deepset, troubled eyes. "Mr. Warne. I heard you defend your thesis at the Commencement, I remember. A brilliant work, sir. I hope you can advise us here."

"I hope I can, Mr. Haverley. Sometimes the stranger within the gates sees what too familiar eyes have over-

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looked. I have heard something from Mr. Mather of what happened, but not all, I think. Will you tell me, sir?"

The fire burned too brightly, Thomas thought, and the low-ceiled room was too warm. An odor of seething fish crept in from the passageway leading to the kitchen. He tugged the woolen scarf away from his throat, and then gave full attention to Mr. Haverley.

"It was sometime about a month ago, but the date I forget. Well after Candlemas it was, well after Candlemas, indeed, when I was called out about sunset by a servant of Dame Alice Reeve. She brought me the word that her son's wife, Margery, was violently ill and they had begun to fear her passing. I could hardly believe it then, for I had seen Margery no later than mid-day, and spoken with her that morning.

"It was warm, almost like late spring, for it has been an unseasonably mild winter, you know, unwholesomely mild. She had gone down the brook valley, she told me, to see if the willow catkins were yet in bud. She was singing to herself, and her steps were more like a dance than the gait of a sober matron, and instead of a seemly hood she wore a ribbon in her hair. I was forced to reprove her. Gaiety is a sin, as are the love of bright fabrics and a merry carriage. Was it to save us for this that Christ died? Ah, well, but you would know what happened. As I say, I met her by the green that morning and reproved her for her frivolity. Her eyes were laughing and her mouth bright and red. I saw upon her no mark of another world. I swear to you that on that morning she had the appearance of no illness of the flesh. She did not die a death of nature, Mr. Warne."

"That morning," Thomas said slowly, "she showed no illness and then at sunset they sent for you. You went, of course?"

"At once and in haste. I had known her since the day of her birth, when I prayed with her dying mother, Simon Hampstead's wife. He was our miller then, as now. And her husband's people I have always known. The greatest landowners hereabout. Dame Alice gives liberally to the church and to the poor. As I say, I went to their house. 'Tis but across the green. You must have marked it — of fine red brick?" The younger man nodded. "But when I arrived her sufferings were ended. The women were closing her eyes. Dame Alice, having labored to save her with whatever skill she had or could command among her neighbors, lay prostrate with shock and grief. Stephen, poor lad, had closeted himself."

"What course had her illness taken?" Thomas asked.

Mr. Haverley reached across his desk and pulled a small, leather-bound book from a pile of other volumes near the huge inkpot. He thumbed the pages lingeringly.

"I have kept a careful record, sir, such as I keep for all deathbed here.

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Since we have no doctor of physic, only women somewhat skilled in herbs and midwifery, and I myself let blood when I am applied to and deem it necessary —"

"A worthy habit, record keeping," said Thomas patiently, wishing he dared ask leave to take a pipe of tobacco.

"Ah, here it is! February 21st, 1699. Mrs. Margery Reeve. Taken about noonday in her husband's house, amongst a party of female company assembled for a quilting, with grievous sharp pains in her stomach region, followed by much vomiting of blood, four hours of agony, weakness, failure of the mortal senses, and then death."

He read it triumphantly, then fell silent.

"I see," said Thomas thoughtfully. "Her death proceeded not from injury or attack, but from some cause within — an illness of nature or perhaps a poison —"

"Or from a work of Satan!" cried Mr. Haverley. "The town says it was by witchcraft. The whispers went out before her corpse was cold."

"Do you believe them, sir?"

The minister avoided the grave, young eyes watching him.

"I — I do not know —" he said suddenly, helplessly. "I have prayed God to instruct me. I have sought for evidence. But I cannot tell."

"And yet you hold a maid in gaol."

"No. Not in gaol, and not a maid either. We have confined the widow, Joan Alder, in an upper room at the Wheat Sheaf tavern until we know how to dispose of the case. We have no proof — but the whispers are all against her."

Thomas cleared his throat. "Mr. Haverley," he said, his eyes searching the eyes that would not meet his, "Mr. Mather has advised that we go forward with much caution in this matter. It is well known where whispers can lead. The Colony learned that at Salem years ago. The gaols were filled then, and your county in a panic, and many people were labeled firebrands of Hell and died on the gallows, many of whom it is now believed were innocent — as innocent as you or I. It must not happen again — in our time or any other time. I believe that if Mistress Reeve did not die a death of nature, she died from poison, since no other weapon could so work upon her from within."

Mr. Haverley was staring out of the window at the fine brick house.

"You may be right," he murmured. "I hope you are. But then we must needs find the poisoner. How will you proceed? How did Mr. Mather instruct you?"

"He did not instruct me. He prayed earnestly that God would do so. Tell me, why was the blame fixed on Widow Alder?"

"Why — why her name was in everyone's mouth."

"That does not answer me, sir."

Mr. Haverley stood up and began to pace the floor, and Thomas noticed then that the wide pine boards were worn from many such pacings.

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"No, it does not answer you. I suppose it was useless to hope — but I had done so. I had hoped that Dame Alice and her son might be spared further grievousness. She is of such piety and her gifts to the church — and he is but a youth. Do you feel you must speak with them?"

"Indeed I must. If Dame Alice is truly pious she will want whatever sin there is in the matter rooted out. And as for her son, he is old enough to be a husband — and a widower. But do you not come to them oversoon? I had not mentioned them. I spoke of the accused. Was it the Reeve family who brought the charges against her?"

"Ah, no." The minister shook his head sadly. "I mention them because I must needs do so in order to tell you why Joan Alder is thought to have desired Margery's death. It is said that she would connive to marry with Stephen Reeve — he is a comely young man, with much land and a full purse."

Thomas Warne widened his eyes. He had the feeling that a thread was being put in his hand — not the thread he was looking for, but one that perhaps would lead somewhere.

"It is a story almost as old as the Fall of Man," he said slowly, "and as sad. Can you be sure it was not Stephen who sought Margery's death that he might have Joan? Joan is fair, I suppose?"

"She is — carnally fair," said the minister between his teeth.

"Has there ever been talk before of her casting spells or eyeing her neighbors' husbands?"

"I have not heard so."

"Was she known to have made any ill motion toward Mistress Margery? To curse her, or to quarrel with her, or attempt any of the uses of witchcraft."

"None such have been reported unto me."

"Has she ever been known to conduct herself unseemly with any man?"

"We do not have light on all her dark ways!" cried Mr. Haverley in exasperation.

Thomas Warne looked at him steadily. "Has she ever been known to conduct herself unseemly with any man?"

"No — but —"

"I shall visit her at the Wheat Sheaf," said Thomas, standing up, "but first I wish to speak with the husband and his mother. Will you accompany me there?"

Mr. Haverley rose with a sigh and put away his leather book. "I will do so," he answered austerely, "out of respect to Mr. Mather, but I cannot believe it is needful. I myself will vouch for them. Remember, they are of God's Elect, and they have suffered much."

"I shall remember," said Thomas, stepping out into the sunshine.

A few moments later he was seated on damask cushions deep in a wainscot chair, enjoying the hospitality of the brick house with the turkey red hangings. Dame Alice Reeve, a slight

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woman with sharp, high-boned features and graying locks, sat across the room on a straight chair, holding herself tense and prim while the servant handed round cakes and cherry brandy.

"Of course I understand your presence here, Mr. Warne, and we are hopeful that you will bring us light. Poor Margery's passing was a sad matter. We brood on it much, besides having it brought to our constant remembrance. But if there is a sink of evil here, the town must be cleansed of it. I labored to save the girl as if she were my own."

"So I have heard," said Thomas kindly. "Do you agree with Mr. Haverley that it was a death of violence and not some sudden illness come upon her?"

"Oh, sir, I do not know!" She drew a thin, bluish hand across her forehead. "It may have been her state. She had but newly told us that she was to bear a child in the autumn."

"A child? I had not heard of that," said Thomas, turning to Mr. Haverley.

"Nor had I," said the minister sharply.

"I know. We have not spoken of it abroad. I think she had told no one but myself and Stephen. Her father and sister, perhaps. Have you consulted with them?"

"I have not, but I shall. Are such seizures common to women at that time? My mother was a midwife and I was brought up amongst lyings-in, but I never heard —"

"Oh, no, no," cried Dame Alice hastily. "Not common, but still, such as might be. But no, sir. To tell you the truth, I do not think it was any mortal thing. I think it was for her wickedness that she was cut off. How it came about, I do not know. It may be that Satan called her home."

"You think she was wicked? That again I had not been told —"

"But I told you indeed," cried Mr. Haverley flushing. "I told you how, on her very last day on earth, I had to reprove her for frivolity and unseemly carriage as she walked by herself along the common."

"Gaiety, singing, and wearing ribbons in her hair! Did her wickedness consist of that?"

"They are certainly not the behavior of one of God's Elect," said the minister stubbornly.

Dame Alice nodded. "My daughter-in-law," she explained, "was not a godly woman. Her soul took no delight in the contemplation of its Lord, only in the things of this world. I did what I could to save her life, but all the while I strove at the bedside, I felt that I was being overwhelmed by a supernatural power. Her own sister watched with me and half a dozen other women. They can bear witness to what I did, how I used one healing measure after another until I had tried all to no avail."

"You believe that no mortal part had a hand then?"

Alice Reeve studied the tiny blue veins running under the skin of her tightly clenched hands.

"I did not say that," she murmured

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cautiously. "It is well known that Satan can only work upon man through other men, through men who have bound their souls to him and become his human instruments."

"You are thinking of Joan Alder. But you have not brought charges against her."

Dame Alice looked him straight in the eye. "It was not needful, Mr. Warne. The whole town has charged her. The whispers —"

"Who started the whispers?"

She flung out her hands in a helpless gesture.

"Ah, who can tell where whispers start? I have no proof that she injured Margery and none that she did not. But she is a giddy, carnal wench who should be warned out of town if nothing worse."

"Was she at your house that day when Margery fell ill?"

"Yes, she was there," Dame Alice admitted grudgingly.

"And others?"

"Many others — in and out all day."

"So any one of them could have done the hurt and you not known of it?"

"What sort of hurt?"

"Put herbs in Margery's food and drink — or a more active poison."

"They could — if it were the work of a poison."

"Do you know of any drugs or medicines that would bring about such an illness?"

"I? No."

"Do you, Mr. Haverley?"

The minister shook his head sadly.

"Then I should like to speak with Mr. Stephen Reeve."

Dame Alice clasped her hands. "Oh, no — not with Stephen!" she cried. "He has suffered enough! What more do you want to know? I will tell you all — anything you ask! Pray, do not trouble my son!"

"I am sorry," said Thomas Warne.

She bowed her head, rose, and stepped past him into a dim passageway crowded with heavy chests.

"Stephen!" she called, her voice tremulous.

Stephen came among them so swiftly that Thomas had the feeling that he had been close by and listening. It was true, as Mr. Haverley had said, that he was comely: tall and slight, with pale golden hair and warm gray eyes, a girl's mouth, and an uncertain chin. His mother put her hand on the sleeve of his velvet coat and drew him down beside her on a sofa.

"Stephen," she said, "this is Mr. Warne from Boston. It is unfortunate, but as you know, gossip has spread so wide that Mr. Haverley was loathe to proceed in avenging Margery's death until he was strengthened with other opinion."

Stephen Reeve looked downward at the toes of his well-made London boots. He did not look at his visitor or acknowledge the introduction. He waited, sucking his lower lip.

"Mr. Reeve," said Thomas slowly, reproaching himself inwardly because he could feel his own lip wanting to curl, "as I came into town I stopped

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by your wife's grave. I read on her stone that she was but eighteen years old. That is not an age for death — not for a girl who sings and wears ribbons in her hair and gathers willow catkins, a girl who is to bear a child."

Stephen Reeve turned white but his gaze did not lift. "No," he said.

"Mr. Reeve, what do you know of the way your wife died?"

"I — I — only know — how sweet she was — and how —! Poor Margery!"

He gulped, and stared miserably out of the window at the broad sweep of fields, wet and black, waiting for the plow, dotted here and there with shocks of last year's Indian corn.

Thomas Warne rose. "I am sorry to trouble you further, Mr. Reeve, but one thing I must know. If you are not certain as to what caused the untimely taking off of your wife, why did you have the words *Bewitched to Death* cut on her gravestone?"

"I — I do not know that either. I cannot remember who advised me thus. There were so many besetting me, bemoaning her, trying to comfort me, making things worse — so many who had loved Margery. All the town seemed sure of the cause. I tell you, I do not know."

Thomas watched the young widower keenly, hating himself for the last thrust he must drive home.

"I shall leave now to go and speak with the girl who is said to have had a reason for harming her, a girl who is carnally fair, Mr. Reeve. It is hinted that you may have found her so."

But Stephen Reeve looked at him dully, seeming to feel no thrust at all.

"Speak with whomever you will," he answered. "You cannot bring Margery back that way."

Murmuring his apologies, his thanks and farewells, Thomas stepped out through the wide front door and stood again at the edge of Pemble Common. He paused a moment under the leafless elms bare on the bright sky, waiting for the minister to join him, but Stephen had closed the door fast and it did not open again. A swinging, golden sign on the front of a square house near the Boston Road told him that this was the Wheat Sheaf tavern, and when he entered, the host, a voluble, pot-bellied man in a leather apron, hastened to set out beef and beer. No, there'd be no trouble about his seeing the witch; not that the poor girl was a witch, to his mind. 'Course, he had to keep her under lock and key because Constable said so, but that was better than sending her down to gaol in Salem Town. Oh, she was quiet enough. Ate what victuals he sent up and bothered nobody. Her husband? Henry Alder? No, there was nothing about his death to come in question. Got in a fight with a drunken Indian when he was up the country hunting deer last autumn, and the Indian shot first. No, there'd never been any talk before against Joan. How did he think young Mistress Reeve met her death? Why, eating

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spoiled meat, likely, or the hot, foreign spices from Salem market that the rich set such store by. It was women's gossip, the whole of it. If they was all kept as busy at home as his wife, they'd have no time to go clappering round amongst themselves causing trouble. He winked at Thomas, not noticing the tall hat which the young man still carried under his arm, not knowing he was talking to a minister.

It was a rather small iron key that the host gave to Thomas when he went upstairs, and it fitted an ill-hung lock on a frail pine door. He knocked gently and then called aloud.

"Mistress Alder! May I come in?"

"Who's to stop you?" cried out a warm, pulsing voice that in other circumstances might have been gay. Still Thomas waited.

"You are — if you will. But I hope you will not. I have come here to prove you are not a witch, Joan."

He heard her quick steps moving across the floor and then she called, "You must fetch the key. Or do you have it?"

"I have it."

He turned it slowly in the lock and swung the door open.

He had not fully realized what Mr. Haverley meant when he had said Joan was carnally fair, but now he saw and he agreed. She wore no ribbons or jewels, only an indifferent russet dress, and her chestnut hair hung loose on her shoulders; but if there was ever a woman better designed to put a man in mind of the things of the flesh, Thomas Warne had never seen one and he was not quite sure that he wanted to. Her eyes were warm and brown, and her person was of such a soft, ripe roundness everywhere. She was not bold, and she was not coy, she was simple and direct and somewhat defiant as she took a step toward him.

"So you think I am not a witch! Well now, praise God! Then the whole world has not gone mad, after all."

"No, it has not, but there are those who have, and we must find a way to make them sane again. I will tell you why I am here so you will see it is in no cause against you. We have heard in Boston of Mistress Reeve's strange death, and that witchcraft was suspected and a woman accused. I have been sent to find out the truth of the matter."

She stood looking steadily at him. The room behind her was empty, save for a straw pallet and a broken table and sunlight pouring through a dormer window that looked out at the early afternoon, blue and golden on the burying hill.

After a long moment she said tensely, "Do — do you think you will find it?"

"I am not sure. I mean to try."

"You mean you will try me for a witch? Throw me into a pond to see if I will float, and prick my flesh with needles to see if I will scream?"

"No. I shall not try you for a witch, for you are none. There are no witches, Joan. Many of us do not

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believe in them any more. In time, no one will. But I want to find out how Margery died."

"Oh," she cried, "if only you would! Then they would suffer for it and I could go free! She was so merry, and so eager for life, and gay and brave and innocent, like a child! And so sweet to all! I cried in my pillow all that night it happened. And whoever did it — I hope they burn in Hell. I hope they burn in Hell forever. I hope —"

"Hush, do not curse them, Joan. There are the courts of law to punish sinners, and if they fail to do so, God will not fail. But you think someone is guilty therein? You do not think it was an illness only?"

She shook her head vehemently. "But it could not be! No one dies like that, with no ailing season! Not unless they be old. Not so quick, with such sharp, bloody pain."

"You were there?"

"Yes, I was there, and if you want to hear about it, it happened so: we met at noon at Mistress Reeve's house, and first we were to take food and drink and then to the quilting. Dame Alice is a rich woman and not niggardly, and her servants went round and round the board with silver trays and baskets, and we took what we would."

"What did you eat yourself? If you try to think of that it may help you to remember what was served."

"What did I eat? Why, I, myself, took a bit of ham and corn cake, and pumpkin stewed with molasses and chopped walnuts, and a handful of raisins, and a cup of spiced wine. I think that was all."

"Did you notice what Margery ate?"

Joan wrinkled her forehead. "No, I do not think so. She sat three places off. Meat, I think, but it need not have been ham, for there was turkey and venison as well. She asked me to pass her the pumpkin though; stewed with chopped walnut meats, as I told you, and I remember she complained because there was a sharp bit of nut shell in the serving she ladled up for herself. She laughed, and made a face, and spat it out in her napkin."

"Were any of the rest of you troubled so?"

"I do not know. No one remarked on it. I, myself, was not."

"Do you remember who sat beside her?"

"Yes. She sat between her mother-in-law and her own sister Sarah, and once Stephen came in from the study where he was working on his account books, and she fed him raisins with her fingers. You should have seen Sarah Hampstead's face! He courted her first, you know, and she felt so sure of him. But it was Margery he married."

Thomas sat still, looking at her. Did she know, he wondered, what she was telling him? Was her tongue innocent, or malicious and not too clever? If she kept on so, she would implicate everybody in town.

"I suppose," he said, "Mr. Haverley was there."

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Joan opened her soft, bright eyes wider.

"Why, how did you know?" she cried. "He came in and stood behind Margery and Dame Alice and asked the blessing. Such a long blessing, and we had to keep our heads bowed! I got a crook in my neck. Oh, and one thing more, I remember —"

"What was that?"

"Why, Margery and Sarah! They came in together just before Mr. Haverley began to pray. They were late and made such a commotion sitting down. Margery had been to see her father and he'd made her take a dish of parsnips there, he was so proud to have them thawed this early from the ground. She feared it would spoil her appetite."

He stared at her unsmiling. Suddenly she faltered, stopped, and caught her hand across her mouth.

"I — I see," she whispered through her fingers, "why you are looking at me so, why there is such — such a change of weather about you. I see! I've shown you how all of them, Alice and Stephen and Sarah and Simon Hampstead, how even Mr. Haverley could have poisoned her! But I was only telling you what happened!" Her voice broke.

"And it was you who handed her the pumpkin, Joan," he told her soberly, "stewed soft, and full of nut meats. It would disguise a poison well."

He locked the door behind him, returned the key to the host, and walked out on Pemble Green. Mr. Haverley was just coming away from the brick house. He hailed his younger colleague a little guiltily.

"I apologize, sir. But I felt my duty was to the mourning family. You had left them in an ill case, and much disturbed. Dame Alice weeps and Mr. Stephen hardly restrains himself from it. Are you any further with the business?"

"I think so. I have spoken with Joan Alder."

"Indeed? You think she is guilty then?"

Thomas stood very still, the sun warm on his bare head and the wet mud of the common land making a little sucking sound round his boot soles.

"Mr. Haverley, how do you suggest that Joan Alder killed Mistress Reeve?"

"Why — why — through some subtlety of Satan's power — I do not know how. Witches, we know well, are but his instruments. He uses them as he will. He teaches them ways of doing we cannot detect. He —"

"You do not agree that Joan or someone else may have poisoned Margery in a mortal way with an earthly poison, that she was not slain by any supernatural means at all?"

"I cannot deny it. Satan may work in that way as well as in any other."

"I suppose you are right. I agree with you that any man's death at the hand of another man is Satan's work. But let us go and talk with her blood kin. We may find an answer there."

The two men walked silently to

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the small house under the willow trees, the home of Simon Hampstead, the miller. Simon himself opened the door when they knocked on it, a tall, bent man, his face red with rage and his small blue eyes burning. Behind him stood his daughter Sarah, dark and thin, blotches of crimson anger on her cheeks and her mouth drawn tight. Plainly the two had been quarreling.

"Come in," stormed Simon. "I seen ye from the mill an' come to meet ye. Still stirring the mud, be ye, Parson, an' finding it fouler all the time, I don't doubt?"

"Goodman Hampstead," replied the minister in chilling tones, "we are here to seek light on the strange way of your daughter's passing. Do you not wish —"

"All's I wish is an end of the matter! If Margery got her death, 'twas from the will of God. Let out that poor wench ye have locked in the tavern, an' forget the whole thing."

Even Thomas was shocked. "You sound like an unnatural father, Goodman Hampstead!" he exclaimed.

"And he is!" cried Sarah harshly. "That he is, indeed. Perhaps he killed her himself for all we know. He hated her! He always did!"

"Hold your tongue, wench, or it's yourself ye'll hang," roared her father, and Thomas could see a sudden ugly fear growing in the miller's narrow eyes. The red died away from his face and he turned, almost fawning, toward the ministers.

" 'Tis true, I was never so fond of my younger girl as of Sarah here. But 'twas not out of nature. She came at the cost of her mother's life."

"That's a musty lie," Sarah told them. "You was fond of none of us, not even Mother in her time. But you hated Margery the worst because of Uncle William down in Salem Town; because he had money and ships and never a child at all, and you think to have them when he is gone, but he had always favored Margery. And then she came that day and told us she was to bear. 'A son,' she said. 'Think how that will please Uncle William!' I saw the hate in your eyes when she said that. And she died before dark."

"Ye saw hate in my eyes!" he shouted, his temper running as untrammeled now as the brook that lashed past the little house. "An' what was the hate in my eyes 'side of the hate in yours when she stood up to marry Stephen Reeve? An' it wasn't me by her bedstead when she died! It was her dear loving sister!"

It was near an accusation and should have driven the sharp-tongued Sarah to greater fury, but instead she stopped, her mouth half open and her head thrown back. Her eyes softened and clouded, and then a look of recollection came into them, and with it a look of bewilderment.

"Yes, I was there," she whispered. "Dame Alice held a cup full of brandy and treacle and the maids were running with hot poultices. I sat on the edge of the counterpane and tried to hold Margery's hand, but she twisted so.

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'Oh, Sarah, the little knives!' she kept saying. 'They cut me everywhere!' And then she doubled her body and held herself, and choked and shuddered, and then — and then, she was gone!"

"The little knives!" cried Mr. Haverley in triumph. "We must search again in the witch's house. We shall find a poppet in it — a poppet resembling Mistress Margery, made with some of her hair or nail parings, no doubt. A poppet stuck with knives, for that is the way witches work. You have helped us indeed, Sarah."

But Sarah had fallen, sobbing, on a three-legged stool beside the chimney. Her father stood near her, his chin sunk in the open collar of his tow shirt, and even he seemed to have no words any more. Silently the two ministers took their leave, but as he pulled the outer door shut behind him, Mr. Haverley began to speak.

"I shall have out the deacons and their wives, and we will tear the Alder house apart, beam and shingle, if need be. Will you aid us, Mr. Warne?"

"No," said Thomas thoughtfully. "I understood you had searched the house before and found no ill evidence."

"And so we have, but from what the sister tells us now, 'tis plain we have not been thorough. You do not agree?"

"It would seem to me, sir," answered the young man slowly, "that the time has come to take counsel with God in this matter."

"You mean you would resort to the Scripture, or to prayer?"

"To prayer, perhaps. In any case, I shall walk out into the fields a little, into the clear air. There is a fog on Pemble Green, Mr. Haverley, a fog of fear and suspicion, and somewhere in it, I do not know where, there is hate. I must pass beyond it for a time in order to summon to this matter thoughts that are my own and not the thoughts that others would think for me."

The minister shrugged. "Go where you will, and I pray that God may instruct you, as I feel he has already instructed me. Perhaps we may have tangible evidence for you when you return."

"Perhaps," said Thomas evenly, walking away, his head bent.

He plodded through the gray and yellow fields, along the flooding brooks that reflected the blue sky, and then the ruddy sunset, and then the emptiness of the early dark, and he did not wonder that Margery Reeve had died aet. 18. With so many who wished her ill, he only wondered that she had lived as long as she had. And he asked himself questions and found no answers at all. Dame Alice had disapproved of her son's wife, but was that disapproval strong enough to cause her to bring about the girl's death? And Stephen himself seemed all dissolved away in grief, but was it honest grief or a shield he had devised to keep his own guilt from becoming known? Had he tired of Margery and desired Joan, newly free, or desired Sarah, his old love again? And as for Joan, knowing herself a tempt-

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ing widow, had she with a bold stroke cut off the single life that stood between her and a rich young man?

Had Sarah Hampstead so abandoned herself to violence and passion, allowed her soul to become so corrupted with jealousy, that she could desire her sister's husband strongly enough to make her sister die? There had been violence and hatred in the house of the miller, stronger, or at least closer to the surface, than in any other spot on Pemble Green. Could a man slay two generations of his own flesh and blood to ensure himself an inheritance of money and ships? Yes, Thomas remembered, it had many times been done.

The young minister walked till the moon rose, round and white between the bare elm boughs, and lights sprang up in all the crooked little houses, and in from the fields and woods the men came trooping home. And he lived over in his mind every scene that had passed before his eyes that day, listened again to every word that every lip had spoken, and tried to make his way into the dark chambers that lie within the hearts of men. When he walked back to Pemble Green he thought he knew the answer. He thought he knew, but he was not certain, and he pondered long and desperately on how a man may invoke the judgment of God. In the end he remembered a way the country folk have used through all the years — an old, simple way.

Mr. Haverley ushered him into his lamplit kitchen and the servant maid ladled up for them the seethed fish he had smelled cooking when he had come in at noon. They ate it with barley bread and drank mugs of dark, heavy cider, and the older man admitted disconsolately that they had found no poppets and no little knives, and he asked if God had seen fit to reveal His Truth to Thomas Warne.

"He has revealed to me a way to proceed," Thomas told him cautiously. "Is it here as in most of our towns, sir, that the entire congregation of the church can be readily assembled at the ringing of the bell?"

"Indeed, yes. It were necessary for our own defense if for no other reason. We have not yet forgotten the Indian wars."

"Then have the bell rung and have Mistress Alder brought from the Wheat Sheaf. Perhaps we cannot yet resolve this thing, but we can try."

Mr. Haverley hastened outside, his cloak flapping in the windy spring night, and Thomas waited a little till the bell in its low tower had been ringing for some moments and light shone out dimly through the diamond-shaped panes of Pemble Church. He waited till the thin voices and moving shadows that were the townspeople had all passed inside, leaving the common bare under the white moon. Then he, too, crossed the narrow strip of sodden grass and walked into the assembly, striding forward to take his place in a chair that Mr. Haverley motioned him to, at the left of the pulpit.

The clamor of the crowd died sud-

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denly, and Thomas sat there for a moment facing them — the calm-faced wives wearing a sort of weathered beauty more becoming than fine garments, and the sturdy, blunt-featured men, used to earning their living by ploughing the fields or the sea. Alice Reeve sat in the front pew on the women's side, as became her goodly estate. Her face was pale and her eyes bright, and she wore a fur-edged mantle. Her son sat across the aisle from her, his jaw slack, his eyes dull and empty.

Searching further back in the crowd, Thomas marked Sarah Hampstead, upright as if a vise gripped her, her dark eyes burning in her white face. Her father, too, had come forth when the bell called him, but he did not meet the young minister's eyes or the eyes of any man. He did not lift his shaggy head. A stout man in a red coat, holding a constable's staff, crouched on a bench by the door, gripping the shapely wrist of Joan Alder who bent forward eagerly, her face full of hope rather than fear.

He turned then and looked across the pulpit into the troubled face of Mr. Haverley, and signaled him to address the congregation.

Mr. Haverley prayed briefly, and then Thomas stepped forward.

"My betters in Boston," he began, with a smile that he hoped was full of charming humility, "welcome always a call from the sister churches, from the golden branches of the one great, glowing candlestick that is the Church of Christ in Massachusetts. It is an opportunity for those of us who go forth among you not only to render aid but to reassure ourselves of the efficacy of the preaching you enjoy, to ascertain if you are instructed in all His Works as you have a right to be."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Mr. Haverley start upright and grip the arms of his chair. He had expected that, but he went on.

"So I shall seek to try you tonight only with the simplest attribute of his glory, to know whether or not you be informed therein. I shall call upon each of you to repeat Our Lord's Prayer, and as I thus indicate, will you rise and do so, that I may bear the word back to Boston that holy uses are well known amongst you."

He did not look at Mr. Haverley as he pointed his finger here and there among the congregation, as the men and women of Pemble Green rose one by one and pronounced "Our Father," having been taught it at the cradleside and knowing it as well as they knew the names they bore. Finally he made an end, and then he paused and looked around him for a long moment.

"And now," he said, "we pass from this to another thing, yet we take the same road on our way. Certain among you have not yet returned me the prayer, because I have not yet called upon you. One of you, at least, will be unable to say it."

He did not look into any pair of eyes. He looked at the nail-studded door at the back of the room. He wanted no more foreknowledge than

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he had. He did not want the proof to break irrevocably upon him before it broke on the others.

"It is an old belief that came here from England with our grandfathers in the first ships, and from what older country it came into England, I do not know, that no witch, no instrument of Satan can repeat this prayer; that it will turn to meaningless syllables in the vile throat of such a one; that out of such cursed lips the sacred words shall not and cannot issue."

"But you told me," Joan Alder's voice rang clear as a chime from the back of the church, "you told me today when you came to see me at the Wheat Sheaf that you do not believe there are any witches. If there are no witches, how can such a thing be?"

Half the congregation turned toward her, and half bent forward to hear his reply.

"Indeed I said to you that there be no witches, Joan, and I do not believe there are. But there are Satan's instruments still. Anyone who kills another — by any means at all — is such an instrument. He need not do it by sorcery. He can do it as well with vicious herbs or a sharp blade. If any living soul in this assembly has contrived the death of Margery Reeve, he is such an instrument, and he will not be able to utter the holy words of Our Lord."

He waited. For a moment silence held them, and then the benches creaked and the congregation settled back with a sigh of relief, once they had unwound the meaning of what he said. They had nothing to fear, for had they not already proved their innocence to him before they even knew what they did? But whom had he not yet called on? Heads turned and necks crooked. Simon Hampstead looked up, smiling bleakly. Dame Alice smiled too, frosty and secure in her rich cloak.

"Sarah Hampstead, will you repeat the Lord's Prayer?"

Sarah Hampstead stood up. "Our — Our Father —" she began tremulously, and broke off.

"Continue," he said evenly, "if you can."

"Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy Name," gasped Sarah. Through to the end she gasped it, and then sat down and began to cry quietly into the folds of her cloak.

Thomas Warne let his eyes wander about the hushed room. Then he turned to Stephen Reeve. Stephen rose and answered straightforwardly in a toneless voice. He recited the prayer without missing a syllable. Then he too sat down.

"Simon Hampstead!" Thomas called sharply.

The miller stood up, scraping his rough boots on the pine floor. He looked boldly toward the pulpit, then lowered his head again like a bull about to charge.

"Our-Father-who-art-in-Heaven-hallowed-be-Thy-Name-Thy-Kingdom-come-Thy-Will-be-done — " He rushed through the prayer without halt or error and threw himself back into his seat.

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And then Thomas called on Joan Alder.

Joan stood up and courtesied, and smiled all about her. "Our Father who art in Heaven," she chanted sweetly, piously, her brown eyes cast down demurely. And the accused witch gave the Lord his own again, word for word. Then she smiled again, and dimpled toward the young man in the pulpit. She settled herself once more on the bench, cocked up her bright head at the constable, and ran out the tip of her saucy pink tongue.

"And now, Dame Alice Reeve," said Thomas blandly, smiling down at the thin, aristocratic woman in the fur-edged cape.

Dame Alice rose graciously. "I shall be glad to oblige you, sir," she answered, smoothing her skirts about her, lifting her head, and stepping away from the pew.

And everyone waited to listen to Dame Alice, because she was the town's great lady, and respected, if not loved. She would settle this Boston jackanapes who had been putting them through their paces like dancing bears. They waited and waited, and Dame Alice licked her lips and moved her throat, and gave forth no sound at all. But her face had gone pale, and then white, and her eyes were beginning to stare.

"The Lord's Prayer, Dame Alice. You can say it — if you are not an instrument of Satan!"

"I — I can say it," croaked Dame Alice, her voice breaking on a high note — a sudden note of hysteria — and then dropping away. "*Nema reverof yrolg eht dna rewop* —"

She stopped in horror and bewilderment, her thin fingers plucking at her throat and mouth.

Thomas held up his hand. "Tell us what she is saying, Mr. Haverley, and what it means."

Mr. Haverley stood up, pale and swaying, gripping the tall, carved back of his pulpit chair.

"She is saying — she is saying — Oh, God help us, I have heard it done at the College as a student's jest — she is saying Our Lord's Prayer backwards! A sure mark of Satan! She is — she is —! Be gone, all of you! Sexton! Constable! Clear the church!"

Later they were alone, the three of them, Thomas and Mr. Haverley seated beside Alice Reeve where she crouched in her pew, shaken with mad, convulsive weeping. Her son Stephen was not with her. He had risen and gone with the others, without giving her a backward look. He must indeed, Thomas thought, have loved his wife Margery. Simon Hampstead had led his daughter away, his heavy arm gently supporting her, and Joan Alder had flirted her skirts a little, drooped her eyelashes, and walked off, a free woman.

"You knew," murmured Mr. Haverley across the woman's bent head. "You knew before she revealed herself, or rather, before God revealed her. You knew — but how?"

"When I walked through the fields and thought about it," answered

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Thomas simply, "I asked myself which one it could be, and I could not tell. And then I asked myself which ones it could *not* be."

"And then?"

"I thought first of the Hampsteads, and of the hatred and distrust that hung like woodsmoke in their kitchen. And then I thought: Simon fears that Sarah may be the one, and since she is all he has left, he tried to shield her till she angered him too far. That was why he wished us to drop the matter. And Sarah burns with hatred for her father because she thinks the crime is his. And therefore, since each suspects the other, each must be innocent. That is clear, is it not?"

"Yes, yes, I should have seen that. But what was there to tell you it could not have been Mistress Joan?"

"Not Mistress Joan. She has a merry eye that roams everywhere and settles nowhere for long. There are too many young men in the world and they are too easy come by for her to risk her body and soul to make sure of one."

"Yes, of course. I fear we shall have trouble with her yet, trouble of another kind. And why did you dismiss Stephen?"

"Because he is not of sufficient valor to crush a caterpillar on a maize stalk. Not only does he lack the capacity for violence, but he lacks spirit and manliness, and then I asked myself why this was so."

"Still I do not see."

"There is a master in every house, sir, and in a house where the woman is master they will change natures in some if not in all, and we can look for wry things to fall about. Remember it was Dame Alice who spoke with us, who tried to shield him from our questions; it was Dame Alice who told us what she wished for us to know. Stephen may have suspected her. I think that he did, for he has not stayed to protest her innocence, though we have not had her own confession, even yet. I put it to you that it was Dame Alice who started the whispers, Dame Alice who egged you on to condemn for witchcraft a girl she feared her son might turn to, now she had deprived him of his wife. You were guilty a little in this, since you permitted yourself to be led. Is that not so?"

"God forgive me," murmured the minister. "It is as you say. I trusted her piety, and I reverenced her too highly for her estate, and she led me as though my nose were looped with an iron ring."

Thomas turned to the hunched figure between them.

"Mistress Reeve," he asked steadily, "how did you do it, and why? Of what substance were your little knives?"

Dame Alice flung back her head, her black eyes dull and bitter in her swollen face.

"They were of glass," she whispered. "Of glass, crushed fine. I broke out a tiny windowpane, high and unnoticed in the rear attic gable close to the chimney. I powdered it in the wooden mortar in the kitchen when

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the house was asleep. I sat by her at the table, and let it fall from my handkerchief into her pumpkin during grace. It was a long grace — I had asked Mr. Haverley to say a long grace — and I stirred it in well with a spoon."

"Why?"

She looked down and her mottled features turned a darker red.

"Do not tell us it was for her wickedness, for we will not believe."

She seemed to collapse upon herself then, and let her head hang limply like a crushed marigold on its stem.

"Why should I lie now?" she murmured. "He has turned from me, and thus I lose all. Very well, I did not kill her for her wickedness. I killed her that I might have my son again as he was before she came, close and sweet, always depending on me, always needing me, the way it was when he was a little boy. I could not bear to have him grow away from me into a man. I wanted him to be mine forever, mine only. I — I would kill her again for that."

Mr. Haverley coughed and stood up. "I think it is time we — but Thomas, there is one thing more. How could you be so sure of the old belief, so sure that the instrument of Satan would falter in the prayer?"

Thomas looked down soberly at the disheveled head of Pemble Green's great lady.

"It was *her faith* I trusted rather than my own, sir. I depended on her belief that there are human instruments of Satan, and if I could convince her that she had become such an instrument, I felt she could not keep from revealing that she bore the mark. Perhaps — I would not be presumptuous enough to declare it, but it may be — perhaps God counseled me to proceed so. What are we, any of us, unless he gives us understanding of the dark ways of our neighbors' hearts? It is always therein that we must look, to try to illumine their darkness with His Light."

The two ministers walked out of the church side by side, Mr. Haverley to summon the constable to make an arrest for murder, not for witchcraft, and Thomas Warne to turn his back on Pemble Green from which the fog had now lifted. . . .

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